Marcel Ray Duriez

Nevaeh

Book: 64

Moments that Would not Fade

Part: 2

6

‘No.’ Poppy shook his head. ‘Tom’s mother and father had written a newspaper in Hungary, a brave newspaper, and the nuns were afraid to keep her in Paris. Instead, they smuggled her out one night, and took her west, took her to a convent in Saint-Laurent, a convent with horses and cows and a river, the Sévre...’

On the other side of the car, the hot cocoa woman was out too. 'Tea?’ the movie star asked the hot cocoa woman as if she were reading her grocery list. ‘Coffee? Lemonade? Orange juice?’

Poppy reached out for the picture, smiling. ‘She had a dozen mothers there. One to teach her English, one to teach her French, one to show her how to milk the cows and make cheese-'

‘And did you see her?’ Kristen asked in a rush. ‘Did you tell her about Tom? Tell her about me?’

‘Yes, to all of that,’ he said. ‘I showed her your picture.’

‘And Tom…’

Poppy put his hand over hers. ‘She said she missed Noah every day. She

is waited through this whole war to go to Canada.

She said she felt sad because she hadn’t said goodbye to him.’

Kristen sat there looking at Poppy, wanting to ask what he had told Christy, almost afraid to hear. ‘What…?’ She began.

‘What did I say?’ he asked her, smiling. ‘I told her that saying goodbye didn’t matter, not a bit. What mattered were all the days you were together before that, all the things you remembered.’ Kristen took a deep breath.

She squeezed Poppy’s hand. The hot cocoa woman shook her head. She was still thinking about the knife. ‘I just want to get Kristen settled,’ she said uneasily.

‘I'm settled,’ I said.

We all stood there for another few minutes, the hot cocoa woman trying to fill the space around us with talk. Then, at last, she opened the car door again and was gone.

‘Want to call me Gram?’ The movie star rubbed her forehead absently with the knife handle. ‘If you want to do the Cahill part you say it ‘Kale,' you know,

like that vegetable.’ She jerked her head toward the cat. ‘That's Henry. He's a little irritable sometimes.’ I followed her up the path and around to the back of the house. Henry came too, reaching out to stab my leg with one irritable claw.

Gram looked back over her shoulder. ‘Hungry?’ I shook my head; the hot dogs were just settling in. ‘Drop your things,’ she said, waving the knife. ‘We'll get them later.’ ‘I've lived here’- Gram raised one eyebrow- ‘since they invented the spoon.’ In the back of the house was a different world: a garden on the edge of the Copses, Deniel so small I could see

around them to houses on the next street. ‘Who did that, anyway?’ I asked, trying her out.

Her other eyebrow shot up. ‘The knife and fork people, who else?’

She patted the scarf and turned to look at me, head tilted.

Carved tree Laural Highlands were stuck in the dirt in front of the Copses, some of them thicker than my arm, others pencil thin. All of them had faces, and bits of grass or wreaths of flowers circled their wooden heads. I touched this one and that, using two

fingers, the ones I used to shadow in my drawings. One of the figures I pulled my hat down over my eyes and stared at her figures. She was an artist.

Films of Kristen Copses. I thought I was alone, sitting on the but Noah steps in front of the house, drawing the Old Man, working with a flesh-peach pencil. Quick sketches, one after the other: hat down over his eyes in the first, standing in front of the river in the next, sleeping in the hammock in the third. His beard and the way he leaned forward, listening. I was trying to capture what he looked like, so I would have it to take back with

me. To remember. The screen door opened in the back of me with that soft swishing noise, and the Old Man came out to look over my shoulder. ‘Oh, Kristen,’ he said. ‘Where'd you learn to do that?’ I shook my head. ‘Kristen?’ I looked toward the river, green today, a willow hanging over the edge. He put his hand on my shoulder. ‘It's a gift,’ he said, ‘to draw things the way they are.’ I sat very still. No one had ever said anything like that to me before. ‘And something else,’ he said. ‘You shine through in your drawings.’ I looked up at him, really looked at him, not a glance that darted away so he could not see my eyes. ‘My name …,’ I began as he

folded himself down on the step next to me. ‘Kristen Denielis a real place.’ I shrugged a little. ‘Kristen wood,’ I said. ‘One word, I think.’ When the Old Man spoke, I jumped. ‘It's where they found you, as a baby?’ ‘An hour old,’ I said in an I-don't-care voice.

‘No blanket. On a corner. Somewhere.’ Didn't a baby deserve a blanket? ‘And just the scrap of paper: CALL HER Kristen COPSES.’ One day I went to see that place. I ran away from one of my houses-tan, green, brick? I circled Queens, on the subway, off the subway, onto the Q2 bus, and off the Q2

bus, until I found the spot. It was winter, bleak, but the houses were pretty. I never did find the Copses, though. I tried to picture it in the spring when I had been born, with birds chirping and the sun shining. Now I saw Green come into view in the rowboat. ‘I play hookey,’ I told the Old Man.

‘Everyone says I'm tough, they say I'm trouble.’ The Old Man made a sound in the back of his throat. ‘Green’s is a great kid,’ I said. The Old Man looked surprised. I waited to hear if he would say anything, but Green’s banged the rowboat hard into the rocks along the bank. The

Old Man made another sound. ‘Watch that, Green’s.’ ‘The Kingfisher is on the branch downstream,’ Green is called. So, we went down to the boat and climbed in to have a look.

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Kristen leaned back against the pew, thinking how thirsty she was. She was dying for a glass of orange soda, or a peach with juice dripping. If Mass did not end soon, and she did not get something to drink...

Gram was looking at her, frowning, so she started to pray again.

She prayed for everyone she could think of, even Sister Jillian.

She looked at the stained-glass window. Outside, everything was red, orange, or yellow. And inside were the sounds of the fan whirring and feet shuffling. They would find Eddie. He had just gotten mixed up and had to find his way back, or they had made a mistake and some other Eddie was lost.

She sat up straight. She had just thought of something. Eddie's picture. She had left it on the table next to the couch in the living room. How was she going to explain to Gram where she had

gotten it? What would Gram say if she knew Kristen had been in and out of the Dillons' empty house? Gram would say plenty. Kristen is in trouble for the rest of the summer. And she would never get back into Lynnnatta's house until the end of the war.

She tried to figure out what to do. She could feel her heart pounding at the thought of Gram reaching for that picture when they got home. She wondered if Gram had seen her put it down.

Gram always saw everything she did not want her to.

But if she had not, if Kristen could get to the living room first, she could grab up the picture, and then...

And then what? She did not have a cent since the tan purse had sunk in the water. How was she going to send it?

And right now, kneelers were banging back, and people were standing. Mrs. White was playing the organ, and everyone was singing ‘Holy God, We Praise Thy Name.’

Kristen edged herself out of the pew before they finished singing. ‘See you,’ she whispered to Gram. And before

Gram could answer, Kristen had ducked ahead of Mrs. Colgan and the other people going down the aisle. She took another quick dip of holy water and raced home.

Gram had locked the door, of course. Kristen rattled the knob and shoved at it with her shoulder, but it did not do any good. She was lucky Gram liked to stand and talk to Mrs. Colgan after church for a few minutes.

She went around the back and slipped off her good shoes and socks. She would have to climb down into the

rowboat and shiny up the pilings into her bedroom.

She stopped. A couple of kids from Broad Channel were rowing out in their boat. They were staring back at her.

She waited a moment, hoping they would turn away and start fishing or something, but they just sat there, one of them fooling around with the oars, watching her.

Gram would be home in five minutes.

‘Forgot my key,’ she called and dropped into her rowboat.

She wondered what they thought about her wearing a pale-yellow Sunday dress as she boosted herself up on the piling and tried to reach the screen.

She could not seem to get high enough, and somehow the hem of her dress was soaking wet. Gram would go on and on about how she would have to wash, starch, and iron it again.

Kristen could hear voices. Gram's voice. Mrs. Colgan's. They were next door, standing there. All they had to do was look down the alley.

She tried to raise her barefoot higher on the rough wood. Any minute she would have a splinter. And any minute Gram would spot her. She held on to the piling with her legs, and feet, and one arm, as tightly as she could, reaching up for the screen, trying to get her fingernails underneath.

And then, finally, she felt the screen give. She pulled it out, opened it wide, then reached out for the sill, holding on, boosting herself in, just as she heard Gram saying, ‘Good grief, what’s that child doing now?’

She raced through the porch and into the living room, grabbing Eddie's picture, and then raced back again to shove it under her bed. By the time Gram was in the house, Kristen was in the bathroom with the door closed and locked, leaning her head under the faucet in the sink, taking deep gulps.

Her dress was a mess, filthy, with a rip in the hem. She took it off as fast as she could, rolled it up in a ball, and reached for her old bathing suit, which was dangling in the shower.

Gram was knocking on the door. 'Kristen. are you in there? Whatever made

you think of getting into a house like that? You could fall and kill yourself. Kristen?'

'I'm trying to get my bathing suit on.'

'I'd like to see the condition of that dress.'

Kristen crossed her fingers. 'It's all right.'

'I'll bet,' Gram said.

Kristen could hear her footsteps going into the bedroom. She took the dress and slid out the door and onto the porch. She pulled Eddie's picture out from under the bed, wrapped it in a towel,

and looked around for a place to hide the wet dress.

Under the mattress. She would figure out what to do with it later.

She was out the door, yelling a quick goodbye before she could hear a word about the piano. But Gram had turned on the news. ‘It is estimated that ten thousand have been killed in the invasion of France.’

Kristen went up the road to cut across the Smiths’ lawn and find Tom.

A moment later, they were rushing down the back road, Noah asking

where they were going, why they were in such a hurry.

‘To the fishing wharf,’ she said. ‘I have to find a purse. A tan one.’

‘I will help. Where-’

‘Under about seven feet of water, and we have to hurry because Gram will be along to capture me any minute.’

He shook his head. ‘Why-’

‘She’s going to find my soaking wet, ripped Sunday dress. She is going to remember I have not practiced the… You ask a lot of-’

‘And what is in that towel?’

‘Don’t say another word, Tom. Not unless you have a pack of money in your pocket. Otherwise, let me think about how I’m going to dive down and find that purse.’

‘But-’

‘That purse has to be somewhere under the water unless a bunch of pirates has moved in.’

‘When…’

Kristen sighed. ‘Will you stop asking questions? We’re in a hurry here.’

A truck had scattered gravel all over the approach to the wharf. It was a good thing Noah had shoes on. It was a good thing her own feet were tough.

Not tough enough. By the time they had gotten to the wharf, she was walking on the sides of her feet, hobbling along. ‘I hope your eyes are good,’ she said. ‘I want you to look into this water and tell me...’

Noah nodded. She could tell he was trying not to laugh.

‘What?’ she said.

‘You look so… so odd walking like that, and your bathing suit…’

‘…is a little faded.’ She looked down. She had put on her oldest one, almost no color left from Gram’s Clorox. Too bad. She put the towel with the picture down on a bench and crouched on the edge of the dock to look down into the water.

‘Dark,’ she said. ‘Really dark today, you can’t see a thing.’

He was looking too. ‘I see a fish.’

‘What good is that?’ she asked. ‘It’s about two inches from the top. We’re looking for a purse on the bottom.’

‘Down with the bar-nackles,’ he said, grinning.

She was still smiling as she rolled over the side and hit the water. It was cold this morning, the water was rough. She kicked hard to push herself down, opening her eyes in the saltwater, trying to see the sand. She swam along the bottom until she thought her lungs would burst, then shot up to the top for a huge gulp of air.

She held on to the wharf for a moment, pushing her hair out of her face with one hand, and felt Noah grab her wrist. She looked at him through blurry eyes. ‘What?’

‘I have money,’ he said.

She nodded. ‘Let me try once more.’

But he would not let go. ‘Let me give you this money,’ he said slowly, ‘if it is important. It is important money.’

She took another breath. She knew she would not find the purse today. It was so dark below, and it could be

hours. She nodded and climbed back up to the wharf.

‘It’s for Lynnnatta,’ she told him, going over to unroll the towel, sitting on the bench. She showed him Eddie’s picture, with his buck teeth smiling up at them. Then she said the rest in a rush, the words spilling out, trying to make him see what Eddie was like, how much Lynnnatta loved him, how Lynnnatta could not remember his face, how she had to send the picture, how…

Noah listened; then he touched the edge of the picture. ‘I cannot remember Christy’s face,’ he said. ‘I can

remember Nagymamma's. She was sitting in the back of her restaurant the day we went away. She was sewing my coat. The collar was wet when she gave it back to me. It was wet from where she was crying. It crackled when I felt it.

'There is money,' he said slowly. 'It is in the coat collar. It is Magyar, Hungarian money, and English money, and American money. Nagymamma said when I touched it again to remember...' He stopped.

Kristen wanted to ask him 'Remember what?' but he looked so sad,

she just nodded and used the towel to dry her face.

‘Lllllyyyy.’ The voice was loud, sharp.

Her grandmother was standing at the other end of the road, hand shading her eyes.

Caught.

Kristen stood there, trying to decide what to do. Then she handed the rolled-up towel with the picture to Tom. ‘Don’t drop it,’ she whispered.

‘Lllllllyyyy,’ the voice came again.

‘What?’ She stood there; she did not move. Gram always wanted her to come when she called as if she were a cat. ‘Lillllyyy.’

She gritted her teeth. ‘Hold on to that with your life, Tom.’ She started back along the path toward Gram, biting her lip as the gravel jabbed into her feet.

‘It’s hard to believe you’re walking all over the place wearing that bathing suit,’ Gram said as soon as Kristen got close enough to hear. ‘And where are your shoes? Any minute you are going to get a splinter. Blood poison next. Besides,’ she rushed on, ‘you look

like a hoyden. I don’t know what people will think.’

Hoyden. Kristen did not even know what it meant. She sighed a huge sigh. Let Gram see she thought she was acting like a pain. ‘I’m going swimming.’

‘At the fishing dock?’

‘Well…’

‘It’s time to practice the piano, Kristen.’

‘I’m not-’ Kristen began.

‘Yes,’ Gram said. ‘Your father spent all that money to bring that piano here from St. Paul’s. For you.’

‘Poppy doesn’t care.’ Kristen shifted from one foot to the other. A stone was digging right through her skin into her bones. Gram was right. She was going to end up with blood poisoning, and Lynnnatta was never going to get Eddie’s picture.

‘You were the one who wanted piano lessons,’ Gram said.

Kristen could see beads of perspiration on Gram’s upper lip. It was

hot as a blister, and they were going to stand there arguing forever.

Gram was right, though. The piano lessons were all her ideas. But that was last winter. How was she to know that it took forever to learn the piano, that you could not even play a decent song like ‘Mairzy Doats’ or ‘Swinging on a Star’ unless you spent your whole life sitting at the piano bench, while everyone else in the entire world was-

‘Will you stop daydreaming, Kristen?’ Gram said. ‘Get yourself home. Change out of that bathing suit, and practice for a half hour.’

Kristen did not wait to hear the rest. Head up, she marched up the road and headed for home.

She threw the bathing suit on the shower floor, put on a pair of shorts and a top, and went to the piano bench. The back door closed a moment later. Gram was home.

Kristen looked up at the old alarm clock on top of the piano. One o’clock. She looked at the hands for a while. It almost seemed as if they were not moving. She stood up and put her ear next to it. It was still ticking, but slowly. It would take forever to get to one-thirty.

‘Kristen?’ Gram called from the kitchen.

She curled her fingers over the keys and started in on the C scale. At the same time, she looked out the window. The sea was tinged with green. Her father would say it had something to do with algae. There was only the slightest swell now, a perfect afternoon to teach Noah to swim.

She closed her eyes, picturing the troopship they had seen, huge and ghostly in the mist. For a moment she thought about what it would be like if they could do it. Wouldn’t it be something if they

could get the rowboat close enough to swim the last few feet, the last few yards? Wouldn't it be something if she could teach Noah to swim well enough for that? Even if he could just keep himself afloat, she could help him. And even if it were not Poppy's ship, it would be going to Europe. Noah could get to Christy, and she- Gram was standing at the living room door. 'What are you daydreaming about?' she asked.

Kristen frowned. 'How much I hate this piano.'

‘Just try,’ Gram said. ‘You can do anything if you work at it. And you love music.’

Kristen did not answer. She started the C scale over and did not look up until Gram was rattling around in the kitchen again.

You can do anything.

Could she?

What was she thinking of, anyway? What she had to be doing was getting Eddie’s picture wrapped and mailed before the post office closed at four. Instead, she was stuck in front of the

piano, the keys a little dusty, with the John Thompson book in front of her.

She played the C scale as loudly as she could, up and down, faster, faster. It made a terrific noise. She could hear Gram bang a cabinet door shut. Kristen was driving her crazy.

Terrific. She played around with her hand down low at the base… making up some Hazel Scott boogie music as she went along.

‘Kristen.’

Back to the C scale. The loudest C scale anyone had ever heard.

Nothing from the kitchen.

Kristen began to flip through the John Thompson book.

Etudes, mazurkas (whatever they were,) waltzes. ‘The Blue Danube.’

She picked the music out with one finger. Da da da da dum dum. She knew that she had heard it before. And that was Tom’s River.

She leaned over to reach Gram’s atlas in the bookshelf. It was heavy and smelled of the attic in St. Paul’s. She put it down next to her on the bench and went through the pages, An Africa, Antilles. G

Germany. That was the Nazi place. It showed a little of Hungary on the edge. Aid there was H Hungary two pages later.

She tried to spot Budapest or the Danube River, but all she could find were a bunch of black lines wandering up and down on a yellow blotch that looked like a piece of a puzzle.

In the center of the book was a map of the entire world.

She ran her finger across it... from Hungary to Austria, to Switzerland, to France. She smiled a little. Madeline in

the book had been there. She remembered that. Madeline was in Paris.

And so was Christy.

That night it was-

‘Spicy, that chicken,’ Beatrice said.

I managed to nod, to chew, at last, to swallow, thinking of the Old Man: ‘Where'd you ever learn to do that?’ And Izzie.

‘You have a gift, simple.’

After dinner Beatrice spread the films out on the table, reaching for my

pad on the counter, one eyebrow raised to ask if she could have a piece of paper. With a twist of her pencil, she showed me how to deepen the shadows on a drawing of the sea.

‘Do it on my drawing,’ I said.

‘Never,’ she told me. ‘It's your world, it belongs to you.’

She ran the pencil through her hair, separating the thick strands.

‘Drawing is what you see of the world, truly see.’

‘Yes, maybe,’ I said, not sure what she meant. ‘And sometimes what

you see is so deep in your head you're not even sure of what you're seeing. But when it is down there on paper, and you look at it, really look, you'll see the way things are.' I frowned. 'Look at a picture one way and you'll see one thing,' I said. 'Look again and you might see something else. That's what the Old Man …' I shook my head. 'A friend of mine said that once.'

'Ah, yes,' Beatrice said, sketching in an eye, bushy eyebrows, sharp lashes as she spoke. 'But that is the world, isn't it? You have to keep looking to find Christy.' She ran one pinky finger over the eyebrow; the pencil smeared just

enough to curve it upward, like a question mark; the other pinky softened the lashes.

I watched her, fascinated. ‘And something else,’ she said. ‘You, the artist, can't hide from the world because you're putting yourself down there too.’ ‘I'm not hiding,’ I said, my eyes sliding away from her.

She laughed. ‘Good thing because your soul is right there in front of you.’ She pointed to the sketch I had drawn of Gram in her scarf. ‘You see, it's what you think of her.’ She turned to Gram. ‘Maybe I can take that trip now, leave you in Kristen's hands. She loves you already.’

I could see that Gram did not know what Beatrice meant. ‘A trip?’

‘To the Southwest.’

Gram nodded then. ‘Yes. Adobe houses, desert, flat rocks everywhere.’

‘I'll paint them all,’ Beatrice said.

I looked from one to the other. Beatrice had picked up the pencil again, sketching herself, drawing a suitcase in her hand. And then she looked at me once more. ‘You're going to be something, you and what language you speak on paper.’ She drew her other hand waving. ‘I love what you have to say, Kristen Copses.’

I sat there, hardly breathing.

‘You have that,’ she said. ‘It's more than most people ever have. Count yourself lucky.’

Beatrice took a forkful of food, eating absently, staring at me the whole time. ‘We worked with all those kids who didn't have any concept of perspective, or even if they had that, the composition was all wrong. If only you had been in one of those classes, Kristen.’ She shook her head, then smiled at Gram. ‘Never- ever mind, she's here's now.’ They were both looking at me, at the tears in my eyes.

I could not swallow what was in my mouth. It was there in a lump, as large as the lump in my throat. ‘Thank you,’ I managed to say. ‘Thank you.’ I scooped up the chicken, piling as many cashews as I could on the spoon. She did not eat, not until she had looked at all of them, holding each one up to the light. Gram kept nodding, reaching over with her fork to point at a line or a figure. And then Beatrice sat back. ‘Imagine. I never saw anyone who was able to do this,’ she said, ‘and I was an art teacher for forty years.’

8

I could feel a laugh coming as she waved her hand. ‘This is my place.’ Like- had a filmy scarf around its neck and held a bird's nest in its bent arms. ‘You?’ I asked.

‘I'll make one of you,’ Gram Cahill said. ‘We'll have to find the right piece of wood. There is one at the back. The shape of the head is there already, the nose sharp, and the eyes …’ She stopped. ‘But only if you stay. It will take weeks for me to do.

Months, maybe.’

I tried to think of what to say. I never stayed anywhere for long before I ran. One morning I would wake up and I would have had enough. I would grab my backpack and go. I would spend time together in the city, see a couple of movies, or if the weather were nice, I would head over to Jones Beach and sleep under the boardwalk. Sometimes it took them days to find me. But they never sent me back to the same place. The people in their houses had had enough of me, too.

Gram waited for me to answer. ‘We taught that long?’ Gram said. ‘Forty-four for you.’ Beatrice brushed her hair.

‘But did I ever once …’ I had been at Gram Cahill's house for three weeks. One morning when I awoke, I realized my thumb was blistered, but I did not mind. We had been cleaning up the grove of trees. I liked the feeling of hacking and slashing and getting things done. A pile of wood rested under Gram's back table now. ‘Not all of it is for whittling,’ she had told me. ‘As soon as it's really cold, we 'll make enormous fires in the fireplace.’

‘No, neither did I.’ Gram smiled at me, reaching across to touch my wrist with one hand.

I knew she was wondering if I would still be there when the cold came. I wondered too. And then she was flying down the stairs, reaching out, as Poppy pushed a duffel bag in ahead of him, and held out his arms for her. A moment later, Gram came down the hall. He held them both, the three of them rocking for a minute until Gram said, ‘I smell the oatmeal burning.’

Kristen hated hot cereal. ‘I’m late,’ she began. ‘I don’t have time for…’ But she never finished the sentence. She heard the noise of the key in the front lock and stopped halfway down the stairs.

She had heard that key so many times, and now she felt the blast of chilly air coming up as the door opened. She felt as if she could not breathe because she knew who it was, knew who it had to be.

They went into the kitchen, Gram bustling around to make tea, and Poppy leaning against the wall, his eyes closed. ‘I’ve thought about this,’ he said.

They sat there the whole morning talking, school forgotten. Poppy told them about his ship passing Ridgway. and seeing the Ferris wheel rising in Playland like a ghost. He told them about France, and how he felt when he stood watching

as the flame at the grave of the unknown soldier was light again.

Then, at last, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a small pile of films, Kristen's mother in her wedding dress, Kristen in the rowboat, Gram standing on the dock. Last was a picture of a girl in a Jeep. She was holding an umbrella and smiling.

'Christy,' Kristen said, tracing the girl's face with her fingers.

'Christy.' Poppy leaned forward. 'I took your letter...' 'Mine and Tom's,' Kristen said.

Poppy nodded. ‘I went to the convent, the daughters

Wisdom, they’re called…’

‘And she was there.’

9

(ST. PAUL’S, 1945)

Kristen was going to be late for school. She pulled on her uniform and ran a comb through her hair. Downstairs Gram was calling, ‘Don’t forget a sweater, and if you’re looking for your boots…’

Kristen sighed. Next Gram would remind her she had left them on the living

room rug again. Kristen took a quick look out at the white flakes that had begun to drift down. It had been a long winter. She was tired of snow and sleet, sick of chapped lips and colds, and the wind that rattled against the windows. It seemed as if summer would never come, and worse, that the war would go on forever. She looked around for her books and her journal, ELIZABETH MOLLOHAN, MY THOUGHTS.

She had written her way through the winter... to Poppy, and Tom, and Lynnnatta, but most of all in the journal, to Sister Sara. Once she had talked about

the way the sea rolled and churned when it stormed, and how homesick she was for Gram’s house on stilts. Another time she had written about Tom, and the day they had said goodbye.

I raised one shoulder. ‘I'm not sure.’

‘Henry and I will treat you like our best company for as long as you stay,’ she said.

A table leaned against the back of the house, an old redwood table with tools: a drill, an ax, and knives sharp enough to split hairs. Henry crouched at

the top of the path, eyes slit, tail switching at me. ‘I'm glad he's not a tiger,’ I said, feeling that laughter again. Gram's eyes danced. ‘Maybe we'll go back and cut that piece of wood anyway.’

I reached for the ax, then followed Gram Cahill into the Copses. And in my head, I told Green’s, I may just stay for a while.

What do you think of that?

Kristen closed her eyes now, thinking about that last afternoon of the summer. The tide had been high and the ocean a deep blue. She had walked with

him out to the jetty. They had stood there balancing themselves on the gray rock, and she had taken the star out of her pocket for him then, one of her mother's from the porch wall. Without thinking, she had stood on tiptoes to give a quick kiss on the cheek, and they had both laughed.

I sat there with my mouth full, looking around at her kitchen. It was like the rest of the house, filled with surprises: The walls were creamy yellow, and ships sailed along with blue ocean moldings. A painted pelican was perched over the stove.

Kristen thought about Sister Sara now. ‘Some people never have a friend like that,’ Sister had said. ‘You were both lucky, Kristen. even if it was only for the summer.’ And then she tapped one finger on the journal. ‘You have promised, Kristen.’

‘How did you know about that?’ Kristen had asked, thinking about Poppy and the books.

Still, it was a terrific breakfast, with Rice Krispies crackling in the speckled bowl. Fall leaves swept across the garden, and Gram's plane went across the wood with a swish-swish sound.

Kristen started downstairs for breakfast this morning, saying the word in her head, promise, half-listening as Gram called, ‘Hot cereal on a chilly day.’ But Sister had not meant that at all. ‘I mean promise as a writer,’ she had said.

10

I had taken only two days off so far, reminding myself that the hot cocoa woman would be checking up on me. And the absence notes I wrote myself and signed in a spidery hand that looked like Gram's were masterpieces: Kristen had a high fever over the weekend. Please send her home if she looks flushed. Or Kristen

had a severe rash. We learned that she is allergic to tomatoes. Pity. She enjoys them.

I slid onto a seat opposite her at the table. In front of me was a box of cereal, two bananas, and a Danish neatly cut in half.

The Danish was a little stale and the bananas beginning to freckle. Other days chocolate chips were sprinkled into the cereal, but they must have been all gone.

I shoved the last of a banana into my mouth and watched as Gram plopped

a straw hat with a rose onto her head and wrapped one of those filmy scarves twice around her neck; then I followed her out to the garage.

I stretched, not ready to get up, and looked around the bedroom. It was wonderful, the first place the sun hit every day so that squares of light turned the room to lemon gold. I stayed under the rose-and-white quilt for a few moments, then pulled on my clothes to go down to the kitchen.

Gram was bent over the table, eyeglasses perched on the end of her nose, working on a piece of wood. From

the hall, I could see her reflection in the kitchen window. She knew I was there, but she just cut another sliver off the wood and blew it away.

They headed back toward Kristen's. By this time, it was almost dark. They had been in the movie for hours. Overhead the first star was just visible.

At last, they stood up, blinking, and went through the lobby.

'Of course, we could not see them,' Noah said. 'So many people.' 'Of course not,' Kristen said. 'But we know they were there. And someday we will

ask...' Noah was smiling at her, nodding. 'And they will tell us.'

Kristen and Noah leaned forward, staring at the faces surrounding the cathedral, looking for Christy, looking for Poppy.

Kristen could almost picture them there, together.

She looked up at the sky. Only a few days were left of summer. And then she thought of the stars on the porch wall at the back of her bed. Her mother's stars. She would peel one for him. He could paste it on the little cardboard with

Christy's address. Yes, she thought she would give it to him before they left.

And Kristen too, 'Thank you.' Then the tricolor, France's flag, went up on the cathedral, and people began to sing the French anthem, the 'Marseillaise.'

She cried too, but they were not the only ones. She could hear crying all through the theater. They watched the main street of Paris, the Champs Elysées, filled with two million people, old women with white hair, men with flags, children, and nuns. Young women were throwing

kisses at the American soldiers, who were riding on tanks covered with flowers.

In one huge voice, the French were shouting, ‘Merci. Merci. Merci...’

Kristen grabbed Tom’s arm. ‘You’ll be able to write to Christy. The Nazis will be gone and... Poppy will go to her.’

‘Christy,’ Noah was saying at the same time. ‘Christy is there. I wonder what she is doing now, at this moment.’

Two days later, they could guess. Noah treated Kristen to movies and a bag

of popcorn, and they watched The Eyes and Ears of the World four times.

They saw films of the great Cathedral of Notre-Dame and heard the story of the little plane that had flown in just above its dome on Thursday. It had dropped the message: ‘Tomorrow we come.’

Next, to her, Kristen could see Noah clutching the arms of the chair. His face was turned away from her, and she knew he was crying. The car was ancient, a Buick from the eighties. The fenders were dented, and a streak of white paint ran across the door, but inside, the seats

were soft and furry, and hanging from the windshield was a small tree figure of a man with gray whiskers.

No, not a man. It was Henry standing on his back legs.

‘I put acorn boxing gloves on him, but they kept falling off,’ Gram said. ‘You don't have to worry about Henry. Henry's ready to stick up for you whenever the chips are down.’

Films of Kristen Copses. ‘Do you know how to fish?’

Green asked. ‘If I wanted to.’ I squinted at the river; I did not know how

to fish, did not know how to swim. I was still trying to figure out how to stay away from that water when the Old Man brought the fishing rods out of the shed. Izzy Regan, the mother, came out onto the porch, the screen door slamming behind her. She waved at us. ‘Hey, guys, catch me something to go with pole beans and corn on the cob.’ ‘Yuck to the beans,’ Green is said.

‘I like pole beans,’ I said. The river meandered along in front of Regans' summer house, and on the opposite side was the Old Man's Mountain. What about that mountain? Coming from Long Island,

I had never gotten within yelling distance of anything more than a hill. So why did this mountain look so familiar?

I stretched my neck to look up and up at its rocky self mostly covered with evergreens. ‘You'll fall over,’ Green is said. I shrugged, reaching for my backpack. Inside were a bunch of colored pencils, stubby things I had collected wherever I could find them. It would take six of them, blues, greens, and grays, to get the color of the river the way it was the first time I saw it.

I had heard of polecats, but never pole beans. Izzy nodded at me. ‘It's great

to have a girl around, Holly. We have to stick together against these guys.' Izzy was the tallest woman I had ever seen. Her blond hair was wrapped around her head, and she seemed to be smiling just for me. And then we were down on the bank, barefoot, standing in the shade of a few scrub pines. The Old Man put a rod threaded with a lure into my hand. 'The best one,' he said.

'This is for luck.' He showed me how to cast so my arm went back and over my head and the line sang out. I watched the feathery lure glide on the water and then did it again, and again. I

could see them but Noah of the river. I could stand on that soft sand dotted with rocks, I thought, and be safe. I put one foot into the cool water and then the other, feeling tiny fish nibbling at my ankles. Across the way was the mountain, tall and green.

‘Pop's mountain,’ Green is said. ‘I'll show you tomorrow. There's a road going up …’ The Old Man tightened his mouth. ‘Be careful of that road. I'm afraid of it.’ Green’s twitched one shoulder. ‘I'm not afraid of anything.’ Anything, I thought. The stucco house woman seemed a world away. We stood there, the Old

Man pointing to a catfish nosing its way along, then a frog sunning itself on a rock, and I closed my eyes. I knew the East Branch of the Delaware River was home. Like a miracle, I caught my first fish that afternoon. They hooked it and watched the silver curve as it broke the surface of the water. It was a huge fish, and

Greens said, ‘Bet you a buck you can't hold on to it.’

He was right there with the net, though, wanting me to get it, as I slipped on the rocks, feeling the water on my legs and then my back as I slid. I tried to get

my balance with one hand, my feet going out from under me, not sure how deep the river was, wondering if my head would go under. Green's arm was on my elbow then, holding me up, and the Old Man called, 'You're all right, Kristen.'

My feet anchored into the sand then. I edged myself back, pulling on the rod, and then the fish was mine. Green poured a pailful of cool water over my head, so my hair was dripping, my clothes soaked. The Old Man was smiling, nodding, and Izzy came down to the bank to see what was going on. Later I drew it all, and whenever I look at the picture, I

remember the taste of the fish that night, grilled on the coals, my feet bare under the porch table, and in front of us, the river. I remember Izzy touching my shoulder as she stood up to get something from the kitchen. Why did I have to mess everything up?

11

‘Delicious?’

She frowned. ‘Yes, but…’

‘Ah,’ I said, trying to guess. ‘Stew? Pasta? Hero sandwiches?’

She shook her head. ‘Delicious.’

I finished my drawing and propped it up on the counter to see what I thought about it. And then I heard the back door,

Beatrice bustling in, her arms laden with bags, and the smell…

‘Chinese food,’ I told Gram.

‘Of course,’ she said. ‘That's what we always have.’

I put the plates out, the knives and forks, and Gram ladled the food into bowls: cashew chicken, moo goo gai pan, bean curd, the smells making my mouth water.

Beatrice stood in the back of me. I looked over my shoulder. She was leaning over, her head tilted, looking at my picture. ‘Did you draw this?’

I nodded.

She took off her glasses and chewed on one stem.

‘Surprising, isn't it?’ She asked Gram.

‘More than that,’ Gram said, beaming, moving Henry off her chair before she sat down.

As I reached for a shrimp roll, Beatrice slid into the seat opposite me

and spooned rice onto my plate, the picture still in her hand.

‘Don't eat,’ she said.

I raised my eyebrows.

‘Not yet. Trot out some more of your films, please.’

I went into Gram's peach living room with the lilac couch. We had tacked up a few of the films I had done: Henry and the pelican, the rock jetties, Gram's thin tree figures in the back garden.

I pulled out the tacks and brought the drawings into the kitchen. There was

no room for them on the table, so I pulled up an extra chair and piled them on that.

‘Now you can eat,’ Beatrice said, reaching for the top one.

Films of Kristen Deniel

I sat on the porch steps drawing the mountain while I waited for Green’s. He was hanging over the motor of the Old Man's truck, fiddling with hoses or connections, muttering to himself. ‘If he'd let me drive this thing for half a minute, I'd know exactly what's wrong with it.’ Half the arguments in that house had to do with Green’s wanting to drive the

truck. ‘Right here on the property, that's all,’ he would say. ‘No big deal.’ The other arguments had to do with his disappearance. It made the Old Man crazy.

Upon the mountain road to follow a deer path, lying on the bottom of the rowboat drifting along searching for the kingfisher, gone somewhere, and dragging me along with him. One night at dinner the Old Man had dropped the box in my lap: tan leather, with dozens of pencils inside, points sharp and perfect, in every color you could imagine, a thick pad of paper, erasers, a pencil sharpener.

I had picked up one of the pencils: French Blue, a soft color that was almost purple.

‘I love this,’ I told him. I had wanted to throw my arms around him, wanted to tell him I had never had a present like this before, no one had. I wanted to tell him but did not tell him; I ducked my head, my bangs a fringe over my eyes. But he knew; I knew he knew.

The Old Man was an artist, but a different kind. He drew circles, lines, and squares that turned into plans for houses and buildings. He said he wished he could do what I did. Now Green is flying around the side of the truck like one of Izzy's

hens, his eyeglasses taped to the side of his head, his hands filthy from the truck.

‘Move it, Kristen Copses,’ he said. ‘We don't have all day here, you know.’ I put the mountain picture carefully inside the box. At the end of the summer, I would give it to the Old Man as a present. Do not think about the end of the summer, I told myself. Green and I raced each other down the road, across the bridge, dead tie, and stopped, out of breath, at the mountain road. After a moment we started up.

Green’s lurched along. At one turn in the road, he was all speed; the

next he would stop short, bent over, nose almost touching the ground. ‘Look at this, Holly, it's a raccoon print,’ he'd say, or ‘See the way this branch is cut off? Beaver, building a den where the stream comes off the mountain.’ The Old Man was right about the road: It was slippery, muddy in the shade, one side ready to slide off the mountain straight into the river. But worth it.

It was Monday afternoon. Kristen put on her sunglasses, her Eddie Dillon sailor hat, stuck a Gertz lipstick in each pocket of her shorts, and her notebook under one arm. It was a beautiful day, a

perfect day, and she had something perfect to do.

Detective.

They could not watch for ships that night. Mr.

Colgan had borrowed Gram’s rowboat for night crabbing, and Mr.

Meyer was caulking at the bottom of his.

‘Want to go to the movie instead?’ Kristen asked Noah when she caught up with him on the Smiths’ porch.

‘Well…’

‘We won’t stay for the whole thing,’ she told him. ‘We’ll just sneak in and watch until eight-thirty, a little Eyes and Ears of the World News, and…’ She tried to remember the newest movie at Cross Bay. She had seen two minutes of it the other day before the matron had caught her and marched her outside, blinking into the sunshine.

‘How much does it cost?’ he asked.

‘Not a cent. I told you, we’re sneaking in.’ She could see he looked worried. ‘Unless you’re afraid.’

‘I am not afraid of anything.’

‘Well, then.’ Action in the North Atlantic was the name of the movie. It was about the troop ships crossing the ocean, and German submarines following along...

She shivered a little, thinking about those ships. Mrs. Sherman had just pinned up another poster over a pile of raisin rings. SOMEONE TALKED, it said in big red letters on top, and underneath was a ship sinking so you saw only the bow, and sailors trying to swim away in waves that were high as mountains.

Kristen tried not to think about it. Instead, she walked down the street in front of Tom. They turned in at the alley on one side of the Cross-Bay Theatre. The alley was filled with itchy weeds that smelled. She could see Noah lifting his skinny legs as high as he could, but she just rushed right through the weeds and around to the back.

'It's hot as a poker in the balcony,' she told him. 'They always leave the door open up there.'

Noah stopped when he saw the fire escape stairs they would have to climb.

‘Don’t be silly,’ she said, knowing what he was thinking.

‘Don’t look down.’

‘It must be two stories,’ he said. ‘You can fall right through those steps, and it looks as if the steps will pull off the side of the wall.’

‘Three stories,’ she said, daring him.

‘I am not afraid,’ he said. ‘I am just telling you.’

She started to climb without answering. She had done this every summer since she was six, up those stairs

a thousand times. The stairs were rickety, she had to admit. And the screws holding them to the wall looked rusty as anything. Wouldn't you think the guy who owned the movie would polish things up occasionally?

She looked back over her shoulder at Tom. He was holding on to the railing for dear life, as Gram would say, stopping each second to close his eyes and take a breath.

'Race you to the top,' she said.

He opened his eyes. 'Sure.'

She grinned. He was a tough kid, that Tom.

The balcony door was opened just wide enough for them to crawl through. She sank on the top step next to the door to watch, with Noah sliding in next to her, breathless. ‘That was so simple,’ he said.

She leaned over. ‘We made it just in time for Bugs Bunny.’

He grinned back. ‘What is up, Doc?’ He spoke.

She started to laugh.

‘What?’ he asked.

‘It’s your voice. It sounds so… so…’

‘Hungarian,’ he said. ‘It is a Hungarian Bugs Bunny.’

She liked the way he laughed, the way he talked. She kept smiling to herself as they leaned back against the steps to watch Bugs Bunny chomping on a carrot, falling off a cliff. They had a perfect spot. They had the whole balcony to themselves.

Not one person was up there.

If they had paid, if Poppy had been with her, she would have been able

to go downstairs to the candy stand and buy a cup of popcorn, or some peanut chews. If she tried it now-that is, if she had still had her tan purse with money-the matron with her flashlight would be right there to pounce on her.

And then it was time for the picture. Words... music... a destroyer being blown up in the water. The noise of it was deafening. Explosions were going on all over the place.

Kristen sat there for a while. She watched one of the ships sink and the sailors trying to hold on too little pieces of

wood or to swim away, just like the poster in Mrs. Sherman's bakery.

And she thought of Poppy. They had heard from him again, but only a postcard. She had missed the mail carrier that day, and the card had slid into the slot in the door, and it had been there all morning until Gram had spotted it. Never so tired. I never worked so hard, to be ready to go overseas. Thinking of you both in Ridgway makes me happy… makes it all worthwhile. Love, Poppy.

Kristen watched one of the sailors, arms raised, go under the water, and then she did not watch anymore.

Noah was not watching either.

‘Don’t you like the movie?’ she asked.

He shook his head.

‘We could leave-’ she began and broke off. She could see the balcony stairs and the beam from the matron’s flashlight bouncing up toward them.

‘I was on a ship like that,’ Noah said.

She blinked. Of course. How else had he got here? She had never thought of that. The matron was halfway up the

stairs now, looking at them, a frown on her face.

‘Tom,’ Kristen began.

‘Are you here again?’ the matron asked. ‘I told you last time it’s dangerous to climb those steps, and you can’t keep coming in here when you don’t pay. It was one thing when you were six years old, but…’

Kristen circled her, with Noah following, and went down the balcony steps to the first floor. They passed the candy counter and the glass stand with

the popcorn piled up to the top and went out the door.

Behind them was the sound of bombs, and depth charges exploding, and in the marquee's light she could see Tom's face, his blue eyes swimming in tears.

She stood there for a moment, wanting to ask him, wanting to know about the ship, wanting to know what had made him cry.

Then she heard the church chimes.

‘It’s nine o’clock,’ she said. ‘Gram is going to have a fit’

They started to run, crossing the street diagonally, just missing an old Chevy with its headlights blackened, its horn blaring at them. They raced past Mrs. Sherman’s. ‘Same cookies,’ Noah said, breathless, and then around the corner of the As Good as New Shoppe with the dusty hat and coat, the flute, and the violin.

By the time they reached the back road, Kristen had a pain in her chest and a stitch in her side, and Noah was not crying anymore. They were both laughing,

and he grabbed her hand and pulled her along until they reached her back door.

‘Tomorrow,’ Kristen called after him. ‘See you tomorrow.’

Kristen had been wandering around all yesterday and today, trying to get another look at Tom. She wore the sailor hat Eddie Dillon had given her last summer, her sunglasses, and a thick layer of Victory Red lipstick from Gertz Department Store,

FREE TAKE ONE. Noah would not recognize her in a hundred years.

It did not make any difference. Once she thought she saw him climbing around on the rock jetties at the beach, and once on Cross Bay Boulevard. But both times he was gone by the time she got close enough for a good look.

Right now, it was Friday afternoon, late, and Poppy was finally coming for a weekend. In the rowboat, Kristen dipped the oars into the water as quietly as she could. Any minute Gram would be after her to practice the piano, Etude in Something or Other, set the table for dinner, and who knew what else.

(RIDGWAY 1944)

Kristen received three and a half presents for her birthday that Monday. Two were books, one was a secret, and the last was a half-eaten candy bar.

Lynnnatta Dillon gave her the candy, a Milky Way. The end of the wrapper was torn back, and teeth marks dented the chocolate.

‘I stole it,’ Lynnnatta said. ‘Stole it for you, and kept thinking about it, and my mouth watered, and I just couldn’t-’

‘-resist,’ said Kristen.

‘Right.’ Lynnnatta grinned. ‘A tiny bite.’

Kristen took the Milky Way by the wrapped end and slid it into her pocket. She was dying to wipe her fingers on her skirt, but she could not hurt Lynnnatta's feelings.

Kristen followed Lynnnatta and her two cats up the baseboard steps to the Dillons' attic. It was the only stand-up attic in Ridgway Beach, a perfect place to look out the window and see what was going on all over the place. Most of the other summer houses had tiny crawl spaces, and Gram's house, over on the bayside, did not even have that. Gram's house was built up over the water on

stilts, without an attic, or a cellar, or even a bathroom with a real tub.

‘Now, listen.’ Lynnnatta leaned toward her, the freckles on her nose like four dots of pepper. ‘I have a pack of things to tell you and they’re all secret.’

‘I won’t tell,’ Kristen said, feeling the heat of the attic, dying to take a quick peek out the window, to do a little spying on the beach at the end of the street.

‘You have to swear… ‘ Lynnnatta began.

Outside, the July sky was so blue it almost hurt Kristen’s eyes, and the wind

was exactly right, so the beach would be packed. Spies were sitting there under their striped umbrellas checking on the ships that steamed away from the Brooklyn Navy Yard.

Lynnnatta’s eyes narrowed. ‘... swear on your aunt Celia’s life in Berlin, Germany.’

Kristen swallowed. She thought of her list of problems:

Number 1: Lies, and then the second list, the list of solutions. Right up there on top was the promise not to tell a lie ever again, not even a tiny little one,

much less one of those gigantic ones about her aunt being an important U.S. spy against the Nazis.

This was the very last one, she told herself, no matter what.

She closed her eyes and crossed her heart over her white blouse. ‘I, Elizabeth Mollahan, promise never to tell your secrets, on my aunt Celia’s life.’

‘And if you tell,’ Lynnnatta said, ‘your aunt will probably be caught by the Nazis… not my fault… and they’ll make her tell all the secret war stuff and-’

‘She’d never do that. She’s the bravest-’ Kristen snapped her teeth together hard before the rest of the lie came out.

Where had her aunt Celia gotten herself to, anyway?

Kristen had not even seen her since she was about four years old.

‘She’ll be marched out, put up against a wall, and shot just like in-’

‘-Fair Stood the Wind for France.’ Kristen and Lynnnatta had sneaked in to see it at the Cross-Bay Theatre three times yesterday.

‘Right,’ said Lynnnatta. ‘Now here’s the first thing I want to tell you. Come on.’

Lynnnatta ducked around the side of the chimney with Kristen behind her. Overhead, Kristen could hear the drone of one of the trainer planes from the naval base. She would love to watch it circling over the beach, dipping its wings…

‘Are you paying attention?’ Lynnnatta asked. ‘Here I am ready to trust you with all my secrets…’

Kristen sank next to her, taking one of the cats on her lap. ‘I’m listening. Of course, I’m-’

Lynnnatta reached for a paper bag. ‘Look.’ She held it out.

Inside were about fourteen candy bars... Hershey’s, Walnettos, Sugar Daddy lollipops, and even a couple of rolls of assorted LifeSavers.

Kristen’s eyes widened. Not counting the dusty case in Mrs. Tannenbaum’s stationery store, she had never seen so much candy in her life. She reached out to run her fingers over a roll

of Necco wafers. Her mouth was watering. She could see four yellow ones in a row, her favorites...

‘Maybe we could take one thing,’ Lynnnatta said. ‘Just one. My mother is saving all this for my brother Eddie in the army. Now that he is a soldier fighting for his country, he gets everything, and I do not even get a sniff of this stuff. She is going to send it all overseas in this heat. The whole thing will be one big, melted mess.’

Without thinking, Kristen reached for the Necco wafers and began to rip open the paper.

‘You like that?’ Lynnnatta asked. ‘Not me. I am going to have a nut thing. Something with chocolate.’

They sat there, not talking, Kristen crunching down on two yellow Necco wafers, feeling the sweetness in her mouth. ‘I hope Eddie won’t mind,’ she said.

‘Listen,’ Lynnnatta said, ‘there’s enough candy here for the whole army.’ She stopped. For a moment she looked worried.

‘D-Day. I wonder if he was there.’

Kristen had a quick flash of Eddie in her mind, his square front teeth, a little separated, resting gently on his lower lip, his nose red. He always had a cold, was always sniffling even on the hottest day of the summer. What Kristen liked best about Eddie was that she could make him laugh. He always knew when she was telling Lynnnatta a story; he never gave her away.

One time she had told Lynnnatta she had almost seen a murder on Cross Bay Boulevard. A car had screeched to a stop in front of Bohack's at closing time, and the Bohack guy would not let the man

in. The man said something about being ready to throttle him, whatever that meant exactly, but he had gone away two seconds later. Kristen had not mentioned the going away part to Lynnnatta, though.

'I even heard the police sirens,' Eddie had said.

'Yes,' Kristen had not stopped for a breath. 'About four police cars. They zeroed right in.'

Eddie Dillon with those square teeth, always ready to laugh. Eddie at Normandy Beach on D-Day? Everyone had talked about it all through the war... the

day that the Allies, thousands of Americans, and English men, would land in France to fight their way across Europe.

Kristen had seen the news in the movies, boats coming close to the shore, the water rough as Ridgway on a stormy morning. The forward flaps of the little square boats had come down, and soldiers had waded through water to their waists, while the Germans kept shooting and shooting... She shivered.

'What is it?' Lynnnatta asked.

Kristen shook her head. ‘Nothing.’

Lynnnatta fished through the candy. ‘Take one more thing,’ she said. ‘I’m going to try a couple of Walnettos next, and maybe just one butterscotch.’

Kristen finished the Necco wafers and took butterscotch too. At home Gram would never let her buy butterscotch candies.

‘They pull the fillings right out of your mouth,’ she would say.

‘Now the next thing is secret,’ Lynnnatta said, her mouth full. ‘We’re

moving out of Ridgway until the end of the war. My father has a job in a factory at Willow Run. It is in Detroit, wherever that is, the largest factory in the world. Top secret. We are going to lock the house, board up the windows, and off we go. My mother, my father, me, and even the cats.' She leaned forward.

'He's going to make those Liberator bombers. B-24's.'

Lynnnatta had the best luck in the world, Kristen thought.

But then she thought about the summer without her. 'When?' 'Tomorrow,'

Lynnnatta said. ‘The next day at the latest.’

‘But we were going to…’ Kristen closed her mouth around another butterscotch. It was not so much that they were going to do anything. But Lynnnatta, who lived at the other end of Queens all winter, had no idea that she was a last-row, last-seat kid in school with terrible marks in everything except reading.

Lynnnatta did not know she told lies every other minute. No, she did not know any of that. That is what made her such a perfect friend.

‘I know we were going to do a ton of stuff,’ Lynnnatta said, ‘but this is important, right? My father must help win the war. And you could link up with those kids in Broad Channel…’ Kristen stared out the window. She could not even begin to think about getting herself over to Broad Channel, walking up and down the streets, looking for friends, trying to act like Shirley

Temple, the actor when she saw a kid her age, trying to smile. My name is Kristen Mollahan, la, what is yours? She shuddered, thinking about it.

‘Did you hear something?’ Lynnnatta asked, raising one hand.

Kristen listened a little nervously. It could not be Nazis on such a sunny day. Maybe Lynnnatta’s mother back from the stores?

Lynnnatta shook her head. ‘I guess not.’ She held the box of Walnettos up to her nose and breathed in. ‘Of course, going to Willow Run isn’t quite as good as having an aunt a spy.’

‘No,’ Kristen said.

‘Or a cousin- a general in the navy.’

Kristen tried to look modest. She could not even remember telling Lynnnatta that.

‘I have one more secret. It is another birthday present. It’ll make you feel better when I’m gone.’ Lynnnatta reached under her collar and pulled a key, knotted in a brown shoelace, over her head. ‘This is for you, the back-door key. You can sneak in, come right up to the attic, and write your next five books.’

Kristen took a breath. This place, hers. She would be here by herself, nobody knowing, without Gram telling her to stop reading and get herself outside in

the fresh air, without the radio blaring war news in the back of her. She would author a wonderful book, never mind the spelling, never mind Sister Jillen.

She took the key, still warm from Lynnnatta's neck, and looped it under her blouse. 'This is the best present I've ever had.'

'I know it.' Lynnnatta glanced at the brown paper bag.

'And you got the best candy bar. I love those Milky Ways.' 'You're right.' Kristen reached into her pocket and

handed it to Lynnnatta. ‘Have a bite of this. Have it all.’

Lynnnatta thought for a moment. ‘It’s only fair. You’ve got the attic, an aunt- a spy, your father probably going overseas any minute, and you’ve already written thirteen books.’

‘Fourteen...' Kristen began another lie and stopped. ‘Poppy’s not going overseas. He’s not going anywhere.’ She shook her head. ‘You forgot. He is an engineer. He’s important right where he is, working in the city.’

Lynnnatta peeled the paperback off the rest of the candy bar. ‘My father said he probably would go this summer.’

Kristen scrambled to her feet. ‘Your father’s wrong.’

Then she saw Lynnnatta’s eyes widen. ‘Holy mackerel,’

Lynnnatta said, ‘it’s my mother.’

Kristen looked over her shoulder. Mrs. Dillon was coming up the attic steps. Kristen could see the top of her headfirst, and then her shoulders.

They scooped the candy back into the bag, Kristen trying to swallow the rest

of the butterscotch, which was stuck to her back teeth.

And then Mrs. Dillon was right there, standing in front of them, looking as if she would burst into tears. ‘How could you?’ she said, looking at Lynnnatta. ‘I walked for blocks for that candy, one store after another, this one didn’t have peppermints, the other didn’t have Hershey’s. There’s a war on, no candy...’ Mrs. Dillon looked out the window. ‘My poor Eddie,’ she said.

Kristen edged her way to the stairs, feeling guilty, feeling horrible. ‘I think I’d better go home now,’ she said

using her best manners. ‘It was genuinely nice of you to have me over.’

She rushed down the stairs, and as she let herself out the door, she could hear Mrs. Dillon. ‘That Mollahan girl is trouble,’ she was saying. ‘And you’re not one bit better.’

Kristen stopped to see if Lynnnatta was going to say anything, but she could not hear a thing. She dug the last of the butterscotch off her back teeth and headed for Grams. The summer certainly was not starting very well, not very well at all.

‘I.’ Gram’s house was the last one on the canal. ‘Where the ocean swoops in to fight with the bay,’ she always said.

Up on stilts, the house hung over the water. In the living room was a deep, soft couch, a radio on its legs, and, this year, the damn piano taking up the whole sidewall. In the back was a square little kitchen. It had so many pots and pans, and bowls, and dishes, and mixers, and mashers that there was not an inch of room left on the yellow counters. Most of the stuff was dusty.

Gram hated to cook.

The two bedrooms were separated from the kitchen by long flowered curtains. One was Gram's, the other was Poppy's.

Kristen was glad there was not a third bedroom. All summer she slept on the porch that was tacked on the front. She was so close to the water beneath; she could lean over in her bed and watch the silver killers zigzagging along just under the dark surface.

Sometimes she looked up at the Big Dipper, but most of the time, like tonight, she watched the searchlights crisscrossing overhead. She knew the

spotters were looking for enemy planes that might come from Germany to bomb New York.

And suppose she was the one to spot a plane and bombs coming down? She thought about it, diving through bombs to rescue the neighbors. She closed her eyes. Germans parachuting into the canal. She would have to grow like crazy, zigzagging away from the bombs, away from the paratroopers. It made her dizzy to think about it.

She listened. Something was going on. Noise. Lights. At Mrs. Meyer's, four houses down. Yes, lights. Mrs. Meyer

had not even bothered to pull the blackout curtains, and the Nazis could zero right in with Kristen two seconds away.

And right now, a car was driving up on the roadside of the Smiths' house. Kristen knelt up in bed and leaned against the screen. Never mind that Gram had told her a hundred times she was going to knock the screen out and go headfirst into the water. 'Mr. Meyer's Model A Ford,' she said aloud. She knew that because she had helped him paint the top half of the headlights black so they could not be seen from the sky. The light Mr. Meyer

had painted had turned out much better than the one she had worked on.

Kristen reached for her shorts and sneakers. She would just get herself down there and find out what was going on. She was not one bit sleepy yet, anyway.

Strange that Mr. Meyer was using the last drop of his gas. He had sworn he was going to hold on to it until the day when the war was over in Europe. ‘Then you and I, Kristen my love, are going to drive up and down Cross Bay Boulevard,’ he had said.

‘We’ll honk the horn every inch of the way.’

She thought about sneaking out through the kitchen, but Gram would be awake in a flash. Instead, she unhooked the screen and pushed it until it swung out.

Noisy, much too noisy. She counted to fifty, then wiggled through the opening and hung on to the window ledge until she felt the piling with her feet. The rowboat was directly underneath.

She let go and landed on one of the oars.

For a minute she rocked back and forth holding her leg, feeling the pain shooting down her shin. Tomorrow she will have a black-and-blue mark the size of a potato.

The boat was rocking too, water sloshing in over the side.

She could hear Mrs. Meyer's back door opening, and the sound of voices, but they were too far away for her to know what they were saying.

Kristen pulled the thick rope over the hook, setting the boat free. Then she pushed herself along under the porches,

moving from piling to piling, not bothering with the oars.

She looked up as she passed slowly under the Colgan's,' the Graves,' the Temples.' Narrow slits of light from the sides of their blackout shades were reflected out onto the water, sliding up and down with the tiny waves.

Under the Smiths' porch, everything was still except for a gentle swish and the boat bumping against the pilings. The voices had stopped.

Kristen sat there shivering, wishing she had brought her sweater. She

wondered how long she should stay there. If she boosted herself up on the piling, quietly, carefully, she could grab on to the edge of the porch. The Smiths' porch was a plain open one, not like hers, which had been made into a bedroom. She could tiptoe across it and see into the kitchen window. She thought about it for a moment.

Gram said her whole trouble was she did not think about things long enough. Of course, she did. She thought all the time about authoring stories, and about the war, and about coming to Ridgway every summer. And she thought

about her mother. Hadn’t she brought a star every year to paste in the back of her bed so her mother would be there in Ridgway too? Of course, Gram did not know that. That was private stuff; no one knew, not even Poppy. Especially not Poppy. His face would get that soft look, that sad look.

Kristen reached for the dripping rope and looped it over the Smiths’ hook. All she needed was for the boat to float away without her. She slid the oars under the seats on one side. One almost broken shin was enough for tonight. Then she

pulled herself up, hanging on to the rough floorboards of the porch.

She left a trail of wet sneaker prints going across, but they would be dry before morning. And then she was under the window, and Mrs. Meyer was talking again, talking a blue streak in her high voice, and Mr. Meyer was talking too, a rumble of sound.

Kristen crouched there, listening, catching bits and pieces. ‘Budapest... so far away,’ Mrs. Meyer was saying, ‘but never mind... safe... the beach swimming...’ Her voice trailed off.

‘Maybe you’d like applesauce,’ Mr. Meyer put in. ‘Or toast... margarine on it, though... butter’s gone...’

‘Andrassy Street,’ Mrs. Meyer said. ‘I remember the cobblestones and Kalocsa’s Restaurant...’

‘How about toast with applesauce on the side?’ Mr. Meyer asked. ‘What do you say, Tom?’

Tom? Who was that, now? Kristen leaned back against the house to look at her leg. In the light from the window, she could see it was a mess.

Noah was not talking, not a word. Kristen listened to Mr. Meyer complaining that you had to be a genius to make the can opener work, while Mrs. Meyer kept going on about the beach.

Then Kristen heard her name, clear as a bell. Kristen Mollahan. Tom, whoever he was, was supposed to meet her, and they were going to be friends, Mrs. Meyer was saying.

Kristen knelt up slowly, so slowly it was as if she were swimming underwater. She gripped the edge of the windowsill with the tips of her fingers, then raised her head just high enough to

see inside and to hear clearly. And what she heard was Noah saying he did not have time to be friends with any Kristen Mollahan, saying her name in a strange, soft way, with an accent.

'I have to find Christy,' he said.

What was he doing there, she wondered, sitting at the table directly across from her, a dish of applesauce in front of him, the skinniest kid she had ever seen in her life? His hair was curly and thick, but it looked as if he had not combed it in a hundred years. She stared at him, his face down in the shadows. A nice face, she thought, even though he

did not want to be friends. Too bad for him. She did not want to be friends either.

He was wearing shorts, and his knees were big and knobby under the table, his legs like sticks. Then he looked up. His eyes were blue, the bluest she had ever seen, and he was looking straight into her eyes. He picked up his spoon, a little applesauce dripping off the edge, and, still staring, pointed it at her.

She could feel the heat in her face, and her neck. Mr. and Mrs. Meyer were turning toward the window, trying to see what he was looking at outside. Kristen scrambled across the porch on

her knees, and down over the edge, hanging on for a second, landing in the boat, grabbing the rope off the hook as fast as she could. She pushed herself back down under the porches so quickly she could hear the water churning up in the back of her.

She did not stop until she was in her bed with the red quilt pulled up to her chin. She lay there thinking about Tom- his blue eyes staring at her-and wondering who Christy was. She could not believe she had been caught like that, sneaking around on the Smiths' porch in the middle of the night.

Too late.

Above her, the screen door opened.

Kristen began to row, singing, ‘ ‘Mairzy doats...’

‘Pretending she hadn’t heard.’

Gram was not fooled. ‘You could set the table, Kristen.’ she called, ‘get everything ready before your father comes.’

‘Going to pick him up in the boat right now,’ Kristen said over her shoulder. ‘Then he won’t have to walk around the long way.’

‘And what about the piano?’

Gram was in love with that piano.

‘Did you practice?’ Gram began.

‘This morning.’ She had not bothered much with the étude, she had done the C scale twice, two minutes, and that was that. She began to sing again, ‘A kiddish divvy too,’ ‘listening for the sound of the door, but it didn’t close. Gram was still standing there, waiting for her to turn around and come back.

Kristen raised the oars, water plinking off the ends, but Gram did not say anything.

‘Going to get Poppy,’ she said again.

In the back of her, the screen door closed.

Kristen dipped the oars into the water again, veering toward the railway station, hurrying now, anxious to see him.

The railroad trestle looped across the bay, flat against the water. Kristen bent over the oars, wondering what Poppy would tell her about on the way back... how hot it was in St. Paul’s and how much he missed her. She smiled to herself, thinking about it.

She saw the smoke from the engine before she spotted the train. A moment later, it pulled into the station, and a knot of people piled out the doors. And there was her father, waving his newspaper at her. She waved back, rowing fast toward the dock, watching the distance narrow, angling around another boat that was coming in to meet the train. Then finally she rammed into the rough wood of the piling. She held the boat steady, stroking, until Poppy untied his shoes, pulled them off, and hopped in.

'Want to row?' she asked, leaning across for his kiss.

He shook his head, smiling, the lines around his eyes crinkling. She reached out to touch them with her fingers.

‘Go the long way,’ he said, ‘around the trestle.’

She knew Gram was waiting, broiling flounder, using the last dot of butter for little round potatoes, but she was so happy to be there with him, she did not say anything.

She dipped the oars into the water, pulling slowly, evenly, watching him. He tipped his hat back and closed his

eyes. ‘This is my favorite place,’ he said. ‘It’s home, even though it’s only for the summer.’

Kristen nodded. Tomorrow they would line up at the deep-sea fishing dock, to climb aboard the Mary L. before the sun came up.

They would fish all day, the boat smelling of kerosene and heat.

Tomorrow night, she and Poppy will walk to the Cross-Bay Theatre. He loved the movies too. It would be her fourth time for Fair Stood the Wind for France, first time paying. Then on

Sunday, after Mass, they had read, finished Evangeline, or…

‘I have to tell you…’ Poppy’s eyes were open now, blue with paler flecks of gray, his face suddenly serious.

‘The Dillons left for Detroit,’ she said quickly. ‘Mr. Dillon’s going to be a supervisor in a factory in charge of making planes.

Top secret, Lynnnatta says.’

Poppy grinned. ‘It won’t be top secret for long, not if Lynnnatta knows about it.’

Kristen swallowed, watching him smile.

He reached out, put his hand on the oars. ‘I have to go too.

I came tonight to tell you.’

She did not look at him. ‘To a factory like the Dillons? When would we leave?’

She looked out across the water, seeing him shake his head from the corner of her eye.

‘The army needs engineers,’ Poppy said.

For a moment she felt as if she could not breathe. ‘Who’s going to take care of me?’

‘Gram,’ he said. ‘Gram, of course.’

Gram. She closed her mouth over the word, did not want to hear it. She and Gram all alone in St. Paul’s this winter, the wind rattling around the house.

‘Please,’ she said, but she did not even know if she had said it aloud.

Poppy put his hand over hers. ‘Listen. People are being killed just for

disagreeing with the Nazis or being Jewish.'

'I'm sick of the war,' she said.

'It's going to be over someday,' he said, 'now that the Allies have landed in France.'

She shook her head. 'It'll take forever.'

Poppy sighed. 'There's been nothing but destruction in this war, families separated, villages ruined, cathedrals bombed...' She opened her mouth, trying to think of something to

say, something that would change his mind.

‘But right behind the armies will be people like me,’ he said. ‘The engineers, the builders. We’re the ones who’ll help put Europe back together again.’

‘Where will you go? When…’

He shook his head. ‘It could be anywhere. England, maybe, or Germany.’

‘I won’t even know where you are.’

‘Yes, you will,’ he said.

Kristen shook her head. ‘Mrs. Colgan doesn’t know where her brother is. She said the censors cross everything out in the letters. She can’t even guess what country.’

Poppy squeezed her hand. ‘That’s true. But I promise I will find a way to let you know, somehow.’

Gram was calling now. She could hear her voice across the water. ‘Jerry, Kristen. hurry.’

‘I love you, Kristen. ‘Poppy said. ‘I love you more than Ridgway. More than anything.’

Kristen edged the boat toward the dock. Gram was outside, her hand cupped over her eyes, watching for them.

'What will Gram say?' Kristen asked. 'She won't like it.

She will hate it. I know she will.'

Poppy moved his hand, held it over Kristen's wrist on the oar. 'Gram knows.'

Kristen stared at him. 'You told Gram first. You knew about it. Both of you keeping a secret... not telling me...'

She shook his hand off her wrist, feeling tears hot in her eyes, a terrible

burning in her throat, feeling angry enough to burst. She hated him, hated Gram.

She started to grow.

‘Kristen.' her father began, then stopped.

She nosed the boat under the porch, banging hard into the piling. She must have chipped a piece of paint off the boat, a couple of pieces. She did not care, did not care about one thing.

Poppy reached out to help her up, but she pulled away from him.

Gram was standing at the edge of the ramp that led to the kitchen, smiling a little, looking anxious at the same time. ‘You told her? I thought you were going to wait until after-’

‘Mind your business,’ Kristen said and said it again. The words came out of her mouth so fast; they ran together. Then she ran up the path, away from the house. She wanted to go back to the water, but she would have to pass them. Instead, she went along the road, running on the tar, which was gluey from today’s sun. She saw Noah and veered away from him, but she knew he had seen her too.

He was standing in front of the Smiths' house, watching her cry.

The next day, as soon as it was light, Kristen was out the door, barefoot, heading for Lynnnatta's house. Peeling shutters covered the windows on the boat Noah floor, winter shutters. She could hear the radio next door, the newscaster talking about the American army caught on the beaches in Normandy: two hundred thousand soldiers waiting to set Paris free. Was that all anyone thought about-news and the war?

Without looking, Kristen slipped the key out from under her collar. She did

not bother to pull the shoelace over her head. She leaned forward. The key fit easily into the lock, the door sliding open under her fingers, and she was inside in a moment.

She wandered into the living room. It was darker than the kitchen in there, the winter shutters tighter on the windows. Still, shafts of light fell across the rug, and the couch, and Eddie's picture on the end table.

She picked up the picture, seeing Eddie's smile, his buck teeth, his boots laced nervous, his cap pushed back over

his frizzy hair. She thought of Poppy, and how he would look in a uniform.

She set the picture back in the same spot. How strange it seemed without Lynnnatta, or even Mrs. Dillon sitting next to the radio listening to Portia Faces Life. Kristen went up the attic stairs, listening to the sound of her feet, and pushed up the window.

The waves were high today. No one was on the boardwalk except a gray gull sitting on the railing, its feathers puffed out over its skinny legs. The legs reminded her of someone, but she could not think of who it was.

Mary L. was still at the dock, sitting low in the water. If only she would see Poppy in line with the other fishers. He would be balancing the picnic basket and tackle box; he would have his fishing rod and hers too.

She felt a terrible lump in her throat. He was packed by now, having breakfast, ready to take the morning train back to the city. And she would not be there to say goodbye.

He had told her about the train last night when she had finally gone home. He had sat on the edge of her bed, his weight tilting the mattress down,

telling her the war would be over some time and they would be right back there in Ridgway with everything just the same.

She had not said a word. She had acted as if she did not care, not one bit.

Now she swallowed hard over the lump in her throat. She was not going back. She would stay in the attic all morning, all day, authoring a book or something. She wished she could stay there forever.

She took deep breaths of the cool air that was coming in. And, leaning over, she saw Tom. He was alone on the beach,

wearing a pale green shirt and shorts. Holding up the shorts was a belt... a ridiculous belt that was miles too big for him.

‘Ah,’ she said aloud. That is what the seagull reminded her of. Tom. He had the same skinny legs with fat knees. He was walking back and forth, shading his eyes with his hands, turning toward her.

‘Oh no you don’t,’ she said under her breath. She ducked away from the window; walking doubled over to the back of the chimney.

Poor Eddie’s candy was gone, bag and all. Only the Milky Way wrapper was left, over in the corner crumpled in a ball.

Kristen looked closer. A piece of paper was lying on the floor. She sank and picked it up, a note from Lynnnatta.

Do not worry, Kristen. I am coming back. Good luck to your Aunt C in Berlin, Germany. I will not tell anyone.

M.D.

And taped to the but Noah was a LifeSaver, a red one, Kristen’s favorite color.

Kristen leaned back against the rough chimney bricks, sucking on the LifeSaver wondering if Poppy's train had left.

She stood up suddenly, so quickly she felt dizzy. Then she was out of the attic, clattering down the stairs, through the hall, through the kitchen, and out the door, listening to the sound of the train. She did not stop to see whether anyone had seen her.

It was too late to get to the station. Instead, she ran across the field to the viaduct over the water, trying to find enough breath to get her there ahead

of the train. She began to wave as soon as she heard it on the tracks, even before she saw it. She did not stop until it was a smudge in the distance, and then gone completely, even though she knew Poppy could not have seen her.

'Yes,' he said, going down toward the Smiths.'

She went into the house, thinking about tomorrow, thinking about asking him all the things she wanted to know.

Gram was in the kitchen making iced tea, and she poured some for Kristen.

‘I was just getting a little worried,’ she said.

‘I was with Tom,’ Kristen said.

Gram nodded at her. ‘Good. I’m glad.’

Kristen went into her bedroom with a glass of lukewarm iced tea and a sprig of mint from Mrs. Colgan’s Victory Garden.

She bent over to run her fingers across her mother’s stars pasted in a neat row, still thinking about tomorrow.

That Noah person had been ducking around all over the place

yesterday, here one minute, there the next, always one step ahead of her, one step ahead of the police.

She had thought the whole thing over. Noah could be a Nazi spy... not a chance-in-a-million spy-like Mr. Egan, but a real one. She counted it out on her fingers, talking to herself as she marched down the block. One, he had come in the middle of the night; two, he had a foreign spy accent, and three, she could not keep track of him.

As soon as she turned the corner, she stopped to put on a slash of Victory Red lipstick. She was getting good at it,

not so much on her teeth anymore, or extra around her mouth. At least she hoped not; there were no mirrors on the way to the beach. She smacked her lips, a little sore from all that rubbing off lipstick before she went home every day.

Then she heard footsteps across the street. She looked back. A miracle. It was from Tom. She ducked behind the mailbox to watch him. It looked as if he was heading for the beach.

She let him get a half-block ahead of her, up the boardwalk steps and down the other side; then she followed along after him.

Instead of taking the steps, she scooted underneath the boardwalk and sank back behind the rusty wire fence to see where he went.

He was carrying something, a big wad of stuff. He passed about two inches in front of her, another miracle that he did not see her, and stopped. What was he up to?

He unrolled the lump, a beach blanket, one of Mrs. Meyer's. She had seen it on the washing line a hundred times, so there was not anything much suspicious there. He sat down and lined up a bottle of Coke, a bag of something-

sandwiches or a foreign spy radio maybe- and a pad of paper and a pencil. Then he settled himself on the blanket, just sitting there looking out at the water, his bony knees up to his chin.

It was a good thing she did not have anything to do. She could sit there if he did. She certainly was not going to hang around Gram's house. She had hardly talked to Gram since the night before Poppy left. She took a breath. Do not think about Poppy. Think about Gram instead.

'We are going all the way to the top?' I drew in my breath. Did I want to

do that, stand on top of the mountain, a mountain of trouble myself? Green shook his head. ‘Pop would have a fit.’ He ran his hand over an imaginary beard. ‘The rocks fall, Green’s, use your head,’ he said in the Old Man's voice. Halfway up was a spot that widened. We looked down and saw the house, and Izzy picking tomatoes, and we whistled at her until she waved, even though she could not see us. Then we sank on a rock and Green’s fished in his pocket for a squished Hershey bar.

‘Should I give you half?’ he asked. ‘You're not as big as I am.’

‘Give me all,’ I told him, laughing. ‘I'm more deserving.’

He held up both pieces, squinting. ‘The Old Man would say that.’ I knew that. Somehow the Old Man thought I was a great kid. How had that happened? I swallowed, thinking of the lemon lady: ‘You want tough?’ she had said. ‘I'll show you tough.’ And someone else, I didn't even remember who it was: ‘You've missed school half the term, how do you think you can get away with all this?’ But I was a new person with the Old Man, with Izzy, with Green’s. It was as if the angry Kristen were seeping right out

of my bones, leaving chocolate as soft as that sticky Hershey bar. I looked at Green is, wondering if he minded that the Old Man thought I was great.

But Green was splitting the candy bar, and he gave me the bigger piece but did it quickly. I was not supposed to know. I took a breath. I thought about the W picture in my backpack: the mother, the father, the brother, the sister. And do not think of that, either I told myself.

Kristen counted the days on her fingers It was time for St. Paul's, time for the sixth grade and Sister Sara. It was time to say goodbye to Tom.

They had sent the letter to Poppy two weeks ago, she and Tom, both writing together, trying not to blot the tissue-thin paper. Noah had shown her the creased scrap of cardboard with spidery black writing before he copied it carefully:

Christy Meyer, Maison-Mère Filles de la Sagesse, Rue de la Santé, Paris. ‘We can’t count on it,’ Kristen had told him. ‘Maybe I’m wrong, maybe Poppy’s not in France.’

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘I know.’

She did not mean it, though. She knew Poppy was there. She was sure of it.

And she kept remembering what he had said in the rowboat. ‘Right behind the armies will be people like me.

We’re the ones who’ll help put Europe back together again.’

Find Christy...

For the first time, Kristen paid attention to the war.

Mrs.Hailey lent them a huge map of France. They hung it in Gram’s kitchen and tried to guess how long it would take Allies to get from Cherbourg to Caen, to Rouen, and last to Paris. And as Kristen moved her finger slowly from one city to

another, she could almost feel Poppy there.

In the meantime, they swam and fished. Noah caught a skate and a sea robin and put them gently back into the water.

Kristen caught a fluke once and, for the first time, a flounder.

And then on Tuesday, they argued. They did not speak to each other for three days, and all because of the new movie at the Cross-Bay Theatre.

‘I am not climbing those stairs,’ Noah had said. ‘I am paying money, and I

am walking in through the front door. I am not a thief.'

'I don't have money,' Kristen had said.

'I will lend-'

'No'

'I will give-'

'No.' She did not know why she was so stubborn, why she was so angry with him. She spent two afternoons in the rowboat by herself before he appeared again at the dock.

‘I have come to swim,’ he said at last.

‘So, swim,’ she said. ‘You don’t need me.’ But she was pulling the rowboat in, ready to put on her bathing suit and go with him.

‘I’m not a thief either,’ she told him.

He raised his eyebrows.

They started along Cross Bay Boulevard, waving to Mrs. Sherman, who was sweeping her walk across the street.

‘Well, all right.’ Kristen spoke as if Noah had said something. ‘I’ll pay. I’ll

save my money this winter, and next summer...' She bit her lip and glanced at him. She knew he would be thinking the same thing. Would he come back next summer?

Would he ever come back?

'I know why you were angry,' he said. 'When people go away...'

She nodded. 'Yes.'

They had just passed the As Good as New Shoppe when the door banged open in the back of them. 'Mrs. Sherman called Mr. Rowley. 'The radio. Turn it on. The news. Paris is free.'

Across the street, Mrs. Sherman flung out her arms. ‘Free.’

Her face was turned up to the sky. ‘That beautiful city-’

‘They’re going to keep going now,’ said Mr. Rowley, ‘those soldiers of ours, right to Germany.’

Kristen stopped walking. Next to her Noah had stopped too.

‘Free,’ she whispered.

The mail carrier rounded the corner. ‘Have you heard the news?’ he called. ‘It’s the first stage of failure. Next

summer we’ll have lights on the boardwalk, and the guys will be home.’

Films of Kristen Deniel

‘Company's coming,’ Gram said. I looked up from my pad.

I was drawing a picture of a boat I had seen at Gram's canal: white with thin blue lines of trim, the name in script on the back, Danbar-J, and the captain hosing down the deck. I could not remember what he looked like, so I sketched in his back, bent over, a watch cap on his head.

‘Who's coming?’ I asked, but Gram had pattered away down the hall, with Henry following her.

‘It's Monday, right?’ she called back. ‘It is,’ I said, squiggling the pencil for shadow.

‘The movie is closed. My cousin Beatrice is coming on Mondays.’ She smiled. ‘I forgot. You do not know that.

Remember, Beatrice had a lingering cold?’

Ah, I thought. A lingering cold. Perfect for my next absence note. I looked

around the kitchen. ‘Not much to eat in here.’

She came back into the kitchen, a thin line of red on her lips. ‘Ah, but Beatrice brings dinner. Wait and see. It will be …’ She patted her lips together.

12

Films of Kristen Deniel Every night we ate soup from a can, Gram, Henry, and I. We sat at the table under a stained-glass lamp that tossed rainbows onto the kitchen ceiling. On the wall was a quick picture of Henry I had drawn. He

was wearing boxing gloves and batting at the light cord.

Gram whittled away on a slice of wood as we dunked bits of donuts or slice-and-bake chocolate chip cookies into the tomato soup. On Gram's check days we ate big.

They went into the kitchen, the three of them, Gram sliding the teakettle onto the stove as soon as they were in the door. ‘Change your clothes, Kristen. ‘She said, ‘and find something of your father’s that Noah can wear.’

And twenty minutes later, they were huddled around the table, hair damp, but wearing dry clothes, with Gram's knitted afghans around their shoulders.

'It was my fault,' Kristen said slowly. 'I told him we could get a ship to Europe. And he was trying...'

'Oh, Kristen. 'Gram said.

Tom's eyes were on her. 'I never really thought we could go. It was a dream. A dreamlike thinking someone will find Christy...' He sighed. 'I just wanted to

see the ships one more time. I wanted to think about the ships going to Christy.'

Kristen nodded, thinking that she had dreamed the same thing, going to Poppy, finding Poppy.

'When I started, it was not even raining. I just row so slowly... 'he said. 'I would not have gone without you.' He shook his head. 'And now I have lost the boat.'

'And we might have lost you both.' Gram scraped back her chair. 'Don't you know that this is what it's all about?

Nagymamma is sending you and Christy away from her, so you would be safe? And your parents publishing a newspaper, helping to win the war, so you'd have a good life?'

'For me? My mother and father?' Noah was nodding. 'I have never thought about that. I have just never thought...'

Gram turned to Kristen. 'And Poppy, who could have stayed right here... He went for you, Kristen. and I had to let him go. My son.' She turned her head a little. 'It was so hard.'

Gram did not say anything else for a moment. She looked like she was stern, frowning a little. But then she put her hand on

Kristen’s cheek. ‘But worth it. Worth the price to keep you safe.’ Before Kristen could say anything, Gram pushed back the flowered curtains and went into her bedroom. ‘I have something for you, Tom.’ She came back carrying a blue case.

‘From the window,’ Kristen said, realizing. ‘From the As Good as New Shoppe.’

Gram smiled. ‘I’ll have to swap fish every week for this violin for the next two summers.’

And Noah was reaching for the violin, running his hands over the case, then snapping it open to look at the shiny wood and pluck the strings.

‘I know about Nagymamma,’ Gram said. ‘I know she’d want this for you.’

But by this time the violin was under Tom’s chin. For a moment he tightened the strings, his head turned to the side. Then the kitchen was filled with

the sound of a Hungarian song, fast, and sharp, and beautiful.

And Gram was nodding. ‘See, Kristen. ‘She said, ‘if you’d only practice…’

And at that moment, Kristen remembered Poppy’s letter.

Give Gram a big hug. She loves you more than you know.

She sat back; glad Gram was there in the kitchen instead of far away like Nagymamma. She listened to Noah playing, his head bent over the violin, his fingers moving on the strings, as the

sound of the rain grew less and then stopped altogether, and in the window, she could see a pale, late sun edge the horizon.

‘This one, this waltz,’ Noah said, ‘is Nagymamma’s favorite.’

But before he had played more than two or three notes, Kristen remembered something else. ‘Good grief,’ she said, ‘my library book.’

‘The book in the rowboat?’ Noah asked. ‘It must be soaking wet.’

‘Come on, Tom,’ she said. ‘We have to get it out of there, dry it off, something. And we have to look for Pap.’

They left Gram with her tea, and as Kristen went out the door, she turned back to see Noah leaning over Gram at the table, kissing her cheek. ‘Grannie,’ he said.

Then Kristen was down in the boat, with four inches of water at the bottom, handing it up to him. ‘Mrs. Hailey will have a fit,’ she said. ‘She said it was a lovely book.’

Noah looked at it, water dripping from the edges, the dye running. ‘I know this book,’ he said. ‘I have read it in school. It’s about the French Revolution, a million years ago.’

Kristen raised her hand. ‘Tom,’ she said. She sank on the wet seat, her feet sloshing in the water. ‘Oh, Tom. The French Revolution. I know where my father is.’

She looked up. ‘He’s been trying to tell me all these weeks.

Madeline and The Three Musketeers. Roland, the French hero. All

in France. That is why he sent me to Mrs. Hailey. He knew she'd tell me there wasn't a book called The Promise.'

Noah was frowning. He did not know what she was talking about.

'His promise, Tom. That is what he meant. He promised I would know where he was, that he would tell me without the censors knowing. It took me all this time.'

And she began to smile, because Noah looked so silly standing on the dock with Gram's pink afghan over his shoulders and the dripping book in one

hand, and because she knew where Poppy was. And then she remembered war news, and all the men who were being killed as the army tried to fight its way across France.

Let Poppy be all right, she thought.

‘We shouldn't do this,’ I told her as we trundled home a cartload of donuts, a case of cat food, and our check-day treat: a gallon of cherry vanilla ice cream and enough Snickers bars to keep us chewing for a week of television nights. ‘We should spread it out.’

Gram did not answer. She hummed a scrap of an old song I had never heard before. That is the way she talked sometimes. She would start with bits of this and that, it could even be poetry. You had to untangle her words in your head like balls of knotted string. And sometimes she would break off in the middle of a sentence, small frown lines on her forehead.

I knew something the hot cocoa woman did not know, something even Emmy, star of the agency, had not guessed. Gram forgot things, forgot words, forgot what she was doing. Not all

the time, but still too often. Gram knew it too. She would look at me helplessly, hands in the air, and then I would rush to finish her sentence for her or to turn down the flame under a pot of soup that was ready to boil over.

'My cousin Beatrice is waiting,' she sang one night and handed me my jacket. She gave her straw hat a twirl as she passed the hook it hung on in the hall. 'Much too cold for this.'

'Where are we going?' I asked.

'To the movies.'

'What will we use for money?'

Gram did not answer. She pulled a brown hat out of the closet and stood in the mirror, arranging the veil in front of her eyes. In the dim light of the hall, she looked young; her skin seemed to glow.

She saw me staring at her, and for the barest second before, I looked away, I could see that her eyes gleamed. ‘Wait a minute.’ She reached out and gently took my arm, so I stood in front of the mirror.

I did not much like to look at myself; there was that scar just healed from the accident on Old Man's Mountain. If I did not see the scar, I did not have to

think about that night and the terrible sound of the truck slamming into the rocks as we slid toward the edge.

Gram took the brown hat off her head and put it on mine. She fluffed out the veil, so it covered my face down to my nose and then she stood back.

I drew my breath at the reflection. No scar, no freckles, and my sandy hair, which usually poked out in all directions, looked soft, almost curly. I looked different, … Pretty was not even the word.

‘Ah,’ Gram said. ‘You know it too. This is the way you are going to look very soon. This is the way you will look for the rest of your life. You have a beautiful face.’

I swallowed. I did not want to take the hat off. I wanted to leave it on forever.

‘Wear it.’ She patted my shoulder, then opened the closet door to take out another hat for herself, a green wool one with flecks of gold and an iridescent clip on one side. She smiled at me.

‘It's yours to have forever, even when you leave me.’

‘I won't leave,’ I said.

She started to say something, but instead fiddled with the lock on the front door and dropped the key into her pocketbook. As we went past the garage, she shook her head regretfully. The gas gauge was on Empty-I had seen that the other day- and we had about forty cents to last us until the middle of the month.

I sighed. I had money Gram did not know about. I always had money; I called it my running money. It could not

be used for gas or food, just running. I had made that bargain with myself a long time ago.

We rushed along in the misty rain for a couple of blocks; then Gram stepped into the middle of the street, her head up, her hands out. ‘Look.’

I put my head back to see fine sleet dropping from the dark sky, streaks of white light.

How would I draw that? I wondered. Black paper, if I could get my hands on some, with white tempera, or the palest gray with a sable brush.

Behind us, a horn blared, a loud, frightening sound. Gram grabbed my hand and we darted out of the street. Strange to feel someone's hand holding mine. The last time was Izzy's. ‘I always wanted a daughter,’ she had said, hands out. ‘Babies, children.

Piles of them.’

Gram and I made right turns at the next three corners. Then in front of us was the Island Theater, with small lights, blurred in the mist, that ran around the marquee.

An old woman sat at the ticket counter. Not as old as Gram, but still her hair was a bundle of braided cotton candy on top of her head, and when she smiled her teeth were butter yellow. Her thumb pointed at me. ‘What's her name, Gram?’

‘Kristen.’ Gram waved her hand at the woman. ‘This is Beatrice Gilcrest, my cousin and best lifetime friend, not counting Henry.’

‘Gorgeous,’ Beatrice told Gram, and it took me a moment to realize she meant me. She leaned forward. ‘I would have seen you sooner, much sooner, but I've had a miserable cold.’ She winked at

me. ‘I didn't want to spread my germs around.’

We smiled at each other; then without paying Gram and I tiptoed past her and went inside.

I peered at the dark theater that stretched out in front of us. Almost no one else was there. It was a school night, and everyone was home, I guess, still having supper, doing homework. It gave me a strange feeling. I thought about Green’s at the dinner table with Izzy and the Old Man or bent over a sheet of paper working on algebra.

‘We have to work to pay our way,’ Gram said, leading me to the candy counter. She turned on the lights, poured a pile of corn and a cup of what looked like parsley into the popcorn machine, then sat back on a high stool behind the counter. ‘Special recipe, this popcorn.’ She nodded. ‘Beatrice and I dreamed it up last winter.’

Gram pointed up. ‘Beatrice lives upstairs. Her apartment takes up the whole top. It's like a bowling alley.’ She shook her head. ‘Can you imagine?’

I nodded, reaching for a kernel of popcorn. It tasted better than it looked.

I had to laugh, thinking about Henry in boxing gloves fighting for me. My main concern about Henry was how to keep out of his way. I stepped back as he jumped into the car and hopped across the backseat to sit on the rear window ledge, his head up, one notched ear forward, his whiskers twitching.

But I did not have time to think about that. I slid into the car as Gram backed out of the garage and down the driveway in one great swoop and, never looking, barreled onto the street.

You would not believe this; I told Green is in my head and grabbed the edge of my seat with both hands.

Gram began to talk, glancing down at her movie-star hands, long and thin, her nails painted fire-engine red but chipping here and there. I wanted to tell her to slow down but bit my lip instead.

I thought I was going to be dead by the time we reached the first crossing. But by the second corner, I realized there was not that much traffic, and the few cars on the road stayed well out of our way, so I began to relax and listen to what she was saying. ‘Going to stay and have

yourself done up in a tree?’ she asked. ‘Stay longer and I'll teach you how to drive. Like movies? We can do that, too.’

My mouth went dry. How to drive? That is what Green would say. You could tell her a story about that, couldn't you?

I brushed at the air, wanting to brush him out of my head. I was trying to think of what illness I would give myself today when the Silver Bullet turned another corner and stopped. Spread out in front of us was a canal with a few fishing boats, kerosene trails sliding out in the back of them on the water, and

beyond the boats, beyond the canal, was more water than I had ever seen.

Kristen could not see light in any of the houses along the row, not even glimpses from the edges of the blackout curtains.

Everyone was gone, it seemed. Gram would not be home for an hour, and the Smiths were shopping, caught somewhere in the rain.

A moment later, she slid down the ramp into the rowboat and began to row toward the marshes. Another bolt of lightning lit the bay, and beneath the seat

in the stern, she could see something almost hidden against the anchor. It was Pap, small and wet, shivering, terrified.

There was no time to take her back, no time to dry her. She would have to stay there huddled under the seat until later until Kristen persuaded Noah to come back.

He had not promised he would not try it, but she thought she had convinced him. How could he have thought he could do it alone, she thought, in a storm like this?

The bay was rough with whitecaps, and the rain, pelting the water, slanted toward her, pushed by the wind. She was soaked through, her hair hanging in strings, dyeing from her shorts running blue over her legs.

A puddle of water was gathering at the bottom of the boat. She knew she should scoop it out with the old coffee can they kept for bailing, but there was not time for it either. She kept her eyes focused on the marshes so the lightning would show her how far Noah had gone.

She was lucky he was a poor rower... unlucky that in the center of the

bay the waves were beginning to rise so high that the boat dropped steeply at times, and the oars did not hit the water with every stroke.

She could not stop thinking of Poppy telling her that someday the war would be over, and everything would be the same. She could not imagine it. And she did not even know where Poppy was.

That last night in the boat he had promised her he had let her know.

Promised!

Something tugged in her mind, and then it was gone.

She was across the bay past the marshes she could not see, and across the channel. The pull of the sea was much stronger now, and as she looked back, she could not see the entrance to the bay anymore, even though she was just a few strokes away. For a moment she could see the misty beams of the tall lights on the boardwalk; then they hid again as the rowboat slid into the trough of a wave.

Then, above the sound of the rain and the waves, Kristen heard another sound, the sound of a motor. A small boat, she thought, a fishing boat, or a cutter, and nearby. The sound was comforting.

She did not feel so alone, even though she could not see it.

And just ahead of her was Tom. He had heard the sound too. In the next lightning flash, she could see him turn, looking over his shoulder.

‘Wait,’ she called. ‘It’s not a ship, not a troopship. Don’t, Tom…’

He could not hear her, but in another flash, he saw her, she was sure. And the rest of it seemed to be in slow motion. The next wave was so swollen, so tremendously high, that it pulled his boat up, and up, and the boat poised there on

the crest for an instant, motionless. She could see him clearly, the orange of his life jacket standing out even in the darkness.

Then, as the wave slid out from under the boat, she could see the forward part rising, straight up. Kristen watched it, breathless, as it slid back, and in that second, Noah was tossed into the sea.

She could see the orange life jacket a little longer, but after only seconds a wave pulled her boat in one direction and Noah in another and he disappeared.

She kept calling, kept trying to turn the boat in circles, glancing at the lights on the boardwalk to mark her place, watching for the streaks of lightning to show her where he was.

She veered away from his empty boat, which was spinning first high on a wave, then into the crest. In another flash, she saw him again, just the quickest glimpse, the orange life jacket, and his dark head above the water.

‘I’m here,’ she yelled, not sure he had heard her, or even seen her, and then another wave came, a mountain of a swell that moved toward them, pushing Noah

toward her. Kristen could see him turning toward her, his mouth open. He was gulping water, and she reached out, and by some miracle, her hand hooked around the top of the jacket. She held it, feeling her nails rip, but knowing she would not let go, even if she was pulled out of the boat.

But the wave was past them now, and the water grew calm just for the second he needed to grip the boat and pulled at his jacket with both hands until he tumbled into the boat.

He lay there at the bottom, the water washing over him, taking deep

breaths. ‘You promised,’ she wanted to say, even though she knew he had not. But she knew it was her fault, all her fault because of her lies, and she told herself she would never tell another lie if she could just get him back safely.

-And-

Now Noah was up on the seat, briefly raising one shoulder in the air, coughing, and reaching out to touch her hand. Kristen turned the boat back into the bay, rowing toward the houses, watching him trembling with the cold. Finally, she nosed the boat in under the porch, the lights on above, and Gram

waiting and watched as Pap, a furious ball of orange fur, streaked out of the boat and up the path away from them.

It moved and rolled, it shimmered, it glowed iridescent silver. The Atlantic Ocean. I itched for a piece of drawing paper.

‘This is my ocean,’ Gram said, as if it belonged to her personally, like one of her hats.

It was the way I felt about the Delaware River. Pain filled my chest as I thought about it. I wanted to sit in the Old Man's rowboat, to lean over and put my

hands into that clear water, to watch the catfish riding along on the bottom, the schools of pickerel lazing in the warm sun.

‘So, what do you think?’ Gram asked.

‘Bigger than a river,’ I said. ‘Rougher.’ I spread out my hands, trying to think of the difference. ‘It's wonderful, but…’

She waited.

‘You can't get your arms around it.’

13

Kristen walked down Cross Bay Boulevard. She had been looking for the mail carrier all afternoon. Just then he rounded the corner. ‘I’ve been waiting forever,’ she told him.

‘It’s too hot to walk fast,’ he said. ‘But I have something for you.’ He pulled out a letter.

‘Poppy,’ she said. She took it from him, smiling. She did not wait to open it. She leaned against the window of As Good as New Shoppe to tear open the thin white envelope. Mr. Rowley, the owner, was moving things around. No more straw hats and the violin was gone.

Instead, he was dragging a huge moose head to the windowsill. It must be a thousand years old, Kristen thought, and it will be in the window for another thousand.

She looked down at Poppy's letter, ran her fingers over the handwriting she loved. He did not say much about himself, but about the end of the summer, and Kristen's going back to St. Paul's. He asked about how many books she had written.

She looked at the moose's head. 'I've written about as much as you have,' she said under her breath. But never

mind, there would be plenty of time for that when school began.

She turned the page over. There was more about books.

Poppy wrote about Madeline again, and A Tale of Two Cities. ‘And remember The Promise,’ he had written. ‘That’s the key to it all.’

There was always something, Kristen thought, as she headed for home. Before she went to the library, she would have to find the Three Musketeers book.

It was not easy. Bent almost double, she searched under the

boardwalk for an hour. Up above, she could hear thunder, and occasionally, she could see streaks of heat lightning in the distance.

But at last, she spotted the book. It was propped up against one of the posts, a little wrinkled, a little sandy, but she blew on the pages and went off to the library to ask the world's crabbiest librarian to find The Promise for her.

Mrs. Hailey looked up as Kristen laid the book on the desk in front of her. 'Ah, Kristen. 'She said smiling. 'I've been looking for you. I know I was crabby the other day...'

Kristen began to shake her head, began to say no, but then just smiled and rolled her eyes.

They both laughed.

‘I was hot and tired, and I didn’t need one more story about a lost book,’ Mrs. Hailey said.

‘That’s all right,’ Kristen agreed. ‘I found the book anyway.’

‘Another reason I’m glad you’re here,’ Mrs. Hailey said. ‘I searched and searched. I even called the library in Jamaica. Your father knows books, but

this time he is wrong. There's no children's book called The Promise.'

'I'll tell him,' Kristen said. She thought for a moment.

'How about A Tale of Two Cities?'

'Lovely book. A little hard, but worth it.' Mrs. Hailey plucked it off the shelf in the back of her and stamped it with the end of her pencil.

Outside the window was a sudden flash of lightning, and then a clap of thunder, so close they could feel the vibration.

Mrs. Hailey shivered. ‘I’m glad it’s closing time. And you should be home too.’

Kristen waved her hand. ‘No rush. Gram is sewing with her club. She left supper for me in the refrigerator.’

Mrs. Hailey glanced out the window again. ‘We’re going to have a storm.’

Kristen nodded. ‘I’m on my way anyway.’ She tucked the book under her arm and was out the door and down the street, feeling the wind pushing her along.

By the time she crossed to the other side of Cross Bay, it had begun to rain. The wind picked up papers and swirled them into doorways, and huge drops spattered the dust along the boulevard.

Kristen began to run, thinking about Tom. She had told a hundred lies, a thousand lies, but Noah had told only one. And it was not a lie. All he had done was keep his eyes closed.

She sighed.

He had sat in the boat the other afternoon and closed his eyes to show

her. ‘I was afraid of the Nazis in France,’ he said.

‘Very afraid.’

Kristen had backstroked the oars gently, keeping the boat away from the porches, as he told her the rest.

‘The lady with the gray dress came with the people from the hospital,’ he said, ‘and I closed my eyes. It was not that they were mean. Christy was sleeping, and one of them said, ‘Poor little girl.’ They took her in an ambulance. I knew if I opened my eyes, they would take me with them. I could have stayed.’

‘It’s all right.’ Kristen could see his hands clasped tight together, and his knees clenched. He was shaking as if he were cold on that hot afternoon. ‘I would have been afraid too,’ she said. ‘I would have shut my eyes.’

‘I wanted to come to America,’ he told her. ‘I wanted to be safe. I didn’t even say goodbye.’

‘Oh, Tom,’ she had said, knowing how he felt.

‘I left Christy… ‘he had begun again, so quietly she had to lean forward

to hear him, ‘...and Nagymamma said to stay together, to be a family.’

Kristen had begun to talk. She said everything she could think of everything she thought Gram might have said. 'The war will be over,’ she told him, ‘And Christy will come, and maybe even Nagymamma. We’ll all be in Ridgway together.’

‘Nagymamma was incredibly old. I think maybe...’ He stopped. ‘Christy has no family except me. She has no one special to watch out for her.’

Kristen could see him looking toward the sea, the waves high, breakers crashing onto the beach. He shivered.

‘The lady leaned over. I felt her putting something into my coat pocket. It is Christy’s address. I will show you someday.’ He shook his head. ‘What good is it? I cannot write to her. I have to go back and get her somehow.’

‘You can’t go back,’ Kristen said. ‘You can see the water. It would never work. It is my fault. I shouldn’t have…’ She bit her lip. ‘It was my lie.’

‘I want to tell you something, Kristen. ‘He said. ‘I was so angry, so sad when I left Hungary. I told Nagymamma I would be angry and sad forever.’

Kristen looked up. It was hard to see his face because her tears were blinding her.

‘Do you know what Nagymamma said?’ he asked, ‘she said I would be happy someday. She said I would have a friend, a good friend. It’s almost as if she knew about you.’

‘We’ll make a pact,’ she said.

‘What is that?’

‘We won’t lie. We’ll be brave.’

‘Yes,’ he said.

‘But not so brave to try for the ship. Promise?’

There was another tremendous streak of lightning. It lit the porch and the whole of the sky, and she could see in the distance a rowboat at the edge of the bay, about to cross through the edge of the marshes. Now, in the pouring rain, Kristen was reminded of her father. She reached the house and pulled open the kitchen door, thinking she was going to write and ask him about the book The Promise.

It was from Tom.

‘Ah,’ she said, stopping to think. ‘There are salt-water people and freshwater people.’ She held up her hand. ‘Then there are some who don't even know enough to fall in love with the water.’ She looked at me with satisfaction. ‘But they're not us.’

I nodded, thinking of how the river might look as it reflected the last of the fall leaves.

‘We'll get out,’ Gram said, ‘and walk along the jetty.’ She was singing under her breath now, a bit of a song I

had learned somewhere. ‘By the sea, by the sea.’ Henry followed us as we went toward the jetty, a path to the sea made of huge boulders tumbled one on top of the other. They were slippery, those rocks, with places your feet could get caught, and I wondered if I should help Gram climb up. But she did not need help. She swung herself up next to me, her scarf blowing in the wind coming off the sea.

‘Just breathe,’ she said.

She did not have to tell me. I had never smelled anything like that air: fish, and kerosene, or salt.

‘I don't know what I'd do without the ocean,’ she said.

-And-

Then we skittered out to where I could not see anything but water in front of us. Gram pointed down with one foot. Between the rocks were pockets of water, and some of them had tiny fish swimming around in them, fish so small they were blurs of pewter. In one pool was a crab whose claws were no bigger than my pinky nails.

I knelt on the edge of a boulder and put my fingers into the water,

watching their reflection as the water moved, feeling the spray on my shirt. Was there snow on the mountain yet?

Do not think about the mountain.

I thought about Green's and the Old Man and Izzy, and I put my hand on my chest because there was such an ache inside.

Gram was a statue standing above me, holding her hat against the wind, her eyes closed, a half-smile on her face.

‘I thought maybe I'd stay for a while,’ I said slowly. ‘As long as you want me to, that is.’

Gram opened her eyes and beamed down at me.

‘So, if you'd like to work on my tree figure…’

She raised her hand to her scarf. ‘I've already started.’

And I knew Green’s would be saying, what are you doing, Kristen?

A few minutes later, six or seven people came in. Gram poured the popcorn into wrinkled paper bags for them, her

mouth full, and then music blared, and the movie came on.

Afterward, we walked home, watching the mist swirl around the bare Laurel Highlands above us. ‘That was a tearjerker,’ Gram said.

I nodded, thinking about it: the story of a boy and a dog and Christmas in a small town.

‘Henry would feel terrible if we brought a dog into the house,’ Gram said, gliding around the icy puddles next to me.

‘I know.’ I was getting used to Henry. He spent every night on my bed

now, and if I did not stretch out my feet he did not attack.

‘But we can have Christmas,’ Gram said. ‘I have ornaments in the attic and an artificial tree. You have never seen the attic. What treasures.’ She stopped her face up to bathe in the sleet, so it coated her eyelashes. ‘There's one ornament, a Santa Claus, Beatrice and I put it on the tree first every year.’ She twirled around, arms up, dipping her graceful hands.

I had that strange feeling again. Everyone was home doing homework for

school tomorrow, and I was watching an old lady dance in the street.

I comforted myself with the thought of sitting in Gram's living room after supper every night, sweet chocolate melting on our tongues, wood shavings around our feet.

It is enough, I told Green is in my head, more than enough. I tried not to think of my W picture with the mother, the father, the brother, and the sister.

14

Films of Kristen Deniel

‘Over the river and through the Deniel…’ Gram sang one morning at breakfast. It was a late breakfast. We stayed up most of the night watching an old black-and-white movie.

‘To Grandmother's house?’ I asked, dropping a cornflake on the table in front of Henry's nose and jumping back as he raised one paw to warn me.

Gram waggled her hand, her head still bent. She was carving my tree figure from a piece of oak, stripping the bark until the underneath showed pale and smooth. The head was there, still

unformed, the nose just a slight sharp mark.

Gram saw me looking at it. ‘A bit at a time,’ she said. ‘The face last when I'm sure I know you well enough.’

I did not say anything. Instead, I ran one finger over Henry's back. His eyes were closed, he was purring, and I figured he did not know it was me.

‘Over the river…,’ Gram began again, rocking in her chair with a pleased look on her face.

Water, I thought. The ocean. We have been there twice this week. Odd to

see the ocean near the end of November. I had always thought of it as something to see in the summertime. I put the tea mugs in the sink, sprayed water over them, and waited, leaning against the counter as Gram took a cut in the side of the wood and gently blew the shavings away.

She stood up then, ready to go, but instead, she stopped to peer out the window. ‘Someone's coming.’

I glanced out and saw the gray car pulling into her driveway. The hot cocoa woman had come to check up on me.

My fault, I told myself. Hanging around here today instead of going to school. It was that lingering-cold note. I had not been able to resist it.

‘It's the wrong time,’ I sang to Gram.

She smiled at me, singing too. ‘And the wrong place?’

I reached for her wool hat and scarf and the brown hat with the veil. ‘Let us go down to the water instead of entertaining,’ I told her.

We slipped out the back door, moving as quietly as we could; it was a

game. We passed through Gram's three-figure garden, went through the Denieland diagonally across the street.

It was a long walk in the cold, and we had not stopped for jackets, so we were both shivering by the time we felt the difference in the air, smelled the sharp, sweetish smell of the ocean.

We climbed up onto the pier. The fishing boats were gone this late in the morning. I knew some of them by now, and I could see the two smaller ones somewhere out near the horizon. I kept thinking of that gray car and trying to decide what to do. I bent down and

picked up a shell. Its edges were crushed but it had a beautiful color, like the sea itself with the sun shining on it.

‘A piece of good luck,’ Gram said.

I slipped into a pocket of my jeans and nodded. We needed luck.

Gram had moved away from me. I turned and saw her lying on the jetty, holding her hat on with one hand, the loose end of her scarf floating in the water. She wiggled herself down and down until I thought she would go over; then, at last, she reached into the mass of

foam that had settled around the stanchions of the pier.

A moment later she was up, strands of seagrass clutched in her hand. Several inches long, curled along the edges, they were the color of sand. Gram smiled at me and held them up to my hair. ‘I thought so,’ she said, ‘almost an exact match.’

I nodded, realizing she had gathered them for my wood figure. It made me think of the drawing box the Old Man had given me. How often had I held up a pencil to match the color against something?

Was the drawing box still at the house in Laurel Highlands?

I turned as I heard a car and tires bumping along the wooden planks of the pier in the back of me: the hot cocoa woman.

She came to a stop about two inches away from us and rolled down the window. ‘Why aren't you in school?’ ‘School?’ Gram asked, looking confused.

I did not answer, of course, I did not. I had learned to keep my mouth closed long ago. In my mind, I pulled myself into a small knot deep inside and

tried to think about something else, anything else.

‘Get in the car,’ the hot cocoa woman said, ‘I'll drive you there right now.’

One of the fishing boats had almost disappeared. All that was left of it was the needle-thin mast on top. Someday I would like to be on that boat, I thought, to see what it would be like to look back at the land. I glanced at the railing that ran along the end of the pier. It was so low it would be hard to see from a ship. ‘School,’ Gram said. ‘Of course.’ She put her hand on my shoulder. It was the hand

holding the seagrass. I felt a soft scratch on my skin.

Gram's legs were bare, with dainty spider veins showing, and her silky shoes were soaked with snow and spray. I did not want the hot cocoa woman to see them.

I opened the back door of the car and slid in, and we drove off, leaving Gram looking after us, her head tilted as she waved at me, the seagrass in her hand blowing in the wind.

‘What's going on here?’ the hot cocoa woman said. ‘No school?’

I ran my tongue over my lips, trying to figure out the best lie I could. ‘I told her today was a holiday, a teachers' conference.’

The hot cocoa woman shook her head. ‘And she believed that?’ she said. ‘We'll have to see about this.’

I reached into my pocket and held on to the shell. For the first time in my life, I thought I would have to go to school. I would have to if I wanted to stay at Grams.

Films of Kristen Deniel

My head was around a burl of wood, the seagrass, dried now, a swirl on top. Gram spent hours over it at the kitchen table, humming to herself, a tray of tiny knives spread out in front of her.

It was Monday, early in December, almost dark in the late afternoon. No Chinese dinner tonight. I was making a dish Izzy had taught me. ‘Special deluxe,’ she had said and smiled at me. Chopped meat, ketchup, Worcestershire sauce, and cheese, spooned over hot rolls. Salad. Pound cake with confectioner's sugar sifted over the top.

It was going to be a special deluxe evening. Beatrice was leaving the next morning for New Mexico, where she would paint the adobe houses and the desert. ‘I'll come back when the mood strikes,’ she had said, ‘or when my money runs out. We'll close up the movie until I get back.’

All week I had had a pain in my chest. I was waiting to see what the hot cocoa woman would do. School was all right. I kept my head in the books, made as on two tests, and had no friends. But if the hot cocoa woman talked to Gram for more than five minutes she would know

about Gram. Strange, how much I wanted to stay. It was because Gram needed me. I had never needed it before. Or wanted? asked a voice in my head. The Old Man had wanted me, I told myself. So had Izzy, so had Green's.

Then why?

Do not think about that. Think about Gram.

'A little forgetful,' Beatrice had said. 'Maybe old age.'

But not always forgetful. There was the afternoon Gram had watched me sketch small films on my pad. 'I

remember something.’ She tapped one red fingernail on her lower lip. ‘There's the paper in the attic. I have not seen it for years. It belonged to my father.’

I climbed the stairs; then, bent like a pretzel, I scurried around the low attic, stepping over bags and bushel baskets, stopping to look at boxes of paper-thin Christmas ornaments and yellowed leather gloves, until I found what she had told me about: huge pieces of paper, gray and dogeared. I ran my hands over them, thinking about the day the Old Man gave me the drawing box.

As I had maneuvered my way back to the steps, Gram had called up. ‘There's an easel, too.’

Beatrice came now, hurrying up for the walk. Her hair had been done up in a high pink swirl at the hairdresser. Her nails matched, and so did her huge pink purse.

We were ready for her with the pound cake on Gram's best plate and the dishes on the table. We ate watching the pale December sun drop behind the trees in the backyard. When Gram went inside for something, Beatrice leaned over. ‘Take care of her,’ she whispered.

I thought of telling her about the hot cocoa woman and the agency, but what if Gram came back?

Beatrice saw me frown. ‘Maybe I shouldn't go.’

‘Gram said you've wanted to do this all your life.’

‘But…’

‘Go,’ I said, wishing I could go too. I would take the Shortline bus up through Philadelphia State. It would be early summer again, the first time I had seen Green Is and the Old Man, playing

checkers in the diner. I would start over. I would do everything differently.

Everything...

But instead, I would do it all right. I would stay with Gram and …

‘I'll take care of her,’ I whispered. Somehow, I said in my head.

Beatrice turned over one of my films. ‘I'll leave my phone number,’ she said. ‘I'll write it down.’ She patted my hand. ‘I won't be there for the first two or three weeks; I'll be traveling around. But just in case.’

‘…The positive.’ ‘He shook his head. ‘Did you ever notice; American songs are strange. I do not know what they mean most of the time.’

‘You’re scaring the fish with that noise.’

‘Not my fish.’ He raised his line. ‘On the ship, last time I was always thirsty, and the water tasted warm. We have to bring juice.’ He nodded. ‘Yes. And fruit. Nagymamma always said the fruit was important. In the winter we ate tangerines.’

‘And how would you carry all this?’

‘In my pocket.’

‘Very interesting,’ she said, forgetting for a moment if she had to tell him. ‘You have pockets in your bathing suit?’

He waved his hand. ‘I did not think of that.’

‘Tom…’

‘No matter. I will drink warm water, and go without fruit if

I have to.’

‘Tom…’

He looked across at her.

She took a breath. ‘We can’t go.’

He turned his head, watching her, and she knew he was seeing the tears in her eyes. She opened her mouth to say she had changed her mind, that she had heard that the convoys were moving out to sea farther south but lying to Noah was not like lying to anyone else. He had a way of looking at her as if everything she said was important, serious, or funny, interesting to him somehow. How could

she tell him something she had just made up? How could she lie again?

‘I lied,’ she said.

She could see the beginning of a quiver on his line. He was about to catch something… something small, a sea robin. But he did not take his eyes off her, and her mouth was so dry she could hardly speak.

‘What do you mean you lied?’ he asked. ‘You mean you do not want to go with me? You are still worrying I am a coward because of the plane because it took me so long to swim?’

‘You’re not a coward, Tom.’

He frowned. ‘I am not afraid of anything.’

‘I tell lies,’ she said, almost whispering. ‘I tell people that my aunt is a spy. I say my father is in the Secret Service. I tell you I’m going to take a ship when I know the ships are too far out, that they seem closer than they are, and the sea is too strong and rough.’

‘But I can go,’ he said. ‘I am not afraid.’

She felt tears running down her cheeks and reached up to wipe them away.

‘You are crying because of your father?’ he asked.

She nodded. ‘And because of you. You thought I would help you go back…’ She took a breath. ‘I said it because I didn’t say goodbye to my father,’ she said. ‘I sneaked out of the house, and I never went back to say goodbye, and now…’

Noah reached out. He held his hand over her wrist the way Poppy had. ‘Kristen. ‘He said. ‘I lie too.’

She shook her head. ‘Not the way I do, every minute.’

‘Yes, because I am afraid.’ For the first time, he saw that line was wiggling, that he surely had a fish. ‘I will pull this fish up and set it free,’ he said. ‘Then I will tell you, Christy. And you will

know why I have to go on this ship back to Christy.’

Kristen had read The Story of Roland with Poppy last winter, but not the other. She and Noah could take a quick trip to the library after they went swimming. Why not?

Gram had finished Lynnnatta's note and was looking out the window now. Her gray eyes were sad.

'Here,' Kristen said, feeling generous. 'Read my letter from Poppy. It will make you laugh.'

Kristen took the last bite of tuna, thinking about a night last summer when they had eaten the same thing. It was almost dark after Poppy had come. They had been talking, laughing. It was something about Gram's fishing being so bad they had to eat canned tuna. And outside, the fireflies had floated over the porch.

‘Do you remember…’ Gram began as she put the letter down.

‘Last summer?’ Kristen asked.

‘No, the year of the hurricane,’ Gram said.

Kristen thought about it, the bay water, usually flat, crashing up against the pilings. Boats, let loose, filled with water, breaking apart and sinking. Their rowboat, upside down, looking like a walnut shell, under a couple of feet of water.

‘What made you think of that?’ She asked.

‘I have a memory of your father, coming down the road, his shoes off…’ Gram bit at her lip. ‘His suit pants were rolled up to his knees, full of mud, his newspaper-’

‘-soaking wet, covering his head,’ Kristen said.

-And-

‘We laughed,’ Gram said.

Kristen nodded. She remembered how funny her father had looked, hopping along. She and Gram had watched from the kitchen door, so-o happy he was home.

And now Gram was crying. Kristen could not believe it. She had never seen Gram cry. Kristen's mouth was suddenly dry.

'Why?'

Gram shook her head, her mouth trembling, trying to smile. 'I miss your father.'

Kristen stood up, about to go to her, to put her arms around her.

'By the time he comes home,' Gram said, 'you'll be playing the piano for him.'

15

It was Friday afternoon, lunchtime. The church bells were chiming twelve, Kate Smith was singing ‘God Bless America’ on the radio, and Kristen and Gram were having hot tuna fish in tomato sauce. It was horrible, but Gram had not caught a fish all week, and Kristen had not even tried.

‘I agree,’ Gram said. ‘I can tell by your face you don’t like it either.’

‘I hate this stuff,’ Kristen said, eating as fast as she could. As soon as lunch was over, she and Noah were going to practice again. They had been in the water so much that Mrs. Meyer said they

were going to turn into fish. She said it smiling. Even Mrs. Meyer could see that Noah was never going to be a fish.

Noah had talked about its last night, said the same thing over and over. ‘We will row the boat out, stay in it until the ship passes right near us. I will only have to swim the last, smallest bit, and I will be wearing a life jacket...’

Kristen stared out the window. The water was rough, rough. Even though the sun was shining, the water had a dark look at it, and she could see whitecaps at the end of the canal. They could not swim

this afternoon. Alleluia. What instead? The movies?

Fishing. Yes, fishing. They had not done that once this summer.

Gram was saying something, had been talking for minutes.

Something about forgetting. Kristen looked up.

‘You asked me for money,’ Gram said.

Kristen took another mouthful, trying not to taste the fish.

‘I don’t need it anymore.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Gram was saying. ‘I asked you how much you wanted, but you were getting dressed, and…’ She raised one shoulder. ‘I never thought about it again until just this minute.’

Kristen looked up, trying to remember. How much? Gram had said. How much had she lost? How much did she need?

Kristen felt a quick flash of guilt.

Gram looked hot and tired. It was boiling in the little kitchen. Even with the shades halfway down, the sun lay in patches on the table, the counters, and

the floor. Suppose something happened to Gram someday?

‘Never mind,’ Gram said. ‘I’m going to make up for it...

and for the tuna too. I have a letter, two letters for you. One from Poppy, and one from Lynnnatta.’ She sighed. ‘Poor Lynnnatta.’ Kristen put her fork down. That is what she got for spending the morning swimming. She had missed the mail carrier. Now Gram would be reading over her shoulder.

Gram slid the letters over to her. Lynnnatta’s filthy as ways, Poppy’s,

airmail, tissue-paper thin. ‘The mail carrier was looking for you,’ Gram said.

Kristen did not answer. She opened Lynnnatta’s first, a long letter in pencil, hard to read in Lynnnatta’s scrawl.

Thank your grandmother for the letter.

Kristen looked up quickly. Gram was not leaning over her shoulder. She was turning the pages of her newspaper, The Wave. Kristen looked down again, finding her place.

Thank her for the picture of Eddie swimming and those funny stories about

when he was little. She made me laugh. I felt so bad. She misses your father. She calls him Jerry, he is not that strange, I always think about him as Mr. Mollahan. We still do not know anything about Eddie.

Love Lynnnatta.

How is the house?

'You wrote to Lynnnatta? You sent a picture?' Kristen asked. 'You didn't tell me that.'

Gram pushed a strand of hair off her forehead. 'I knew how she felt. Suppose it was Poppy?'

Kristen sat looking at Gram from the corner of her eye. She had never thought about Gram missing Poppy, not once in all these weeks. She pushed Lynnnatta's letter across the table to her, then took a breath. She had forgotten the house part. But Gram did not seem to notice anything strange about Lynnnatta's mentioning her house.

Kristen reached for Poppy's letter, the best for last. It was a funny letter, Poppy reminding her of the time they painted the window and the screen had fallen over the edge of the porch and floated away. Your fault, Poppy had

written for fun. They both knew it had been his fault. And then, in the end, there was more about books. Do not forget to read The Story of Roland again, and The Promise. Go to the library for them. See Mrs. Hailey. She knows every book in the world!

Kristen veered off to the sink. She slid in her dish with a couple of other dishes and ran water over them. She could see Gram standing to put a bottle of milk into the refrigerator. No one would ever know tears had been in her eyes a moment ago.

16

Kristen wiped her hands with a towel. ‘We’re going to swim,

Noah and me. And then go to the library.’

Gram nodded, and Kristen was out the door, around the side porch, and down into the rowboat. Noah was sitting there, waiting for her, looking even skinnier than usual with the huge orange life jacket around him.

She hopped into the boat and began to row past the houses, angling toward the marshes, leaning forward to keep the sun out of her eyes. Just before

they sealed the package, Kristen reached for the key on the table and dropped it inside. ‘I think we shouldn’t come back anymore,’ she told him.

‘All right,’ he said, thinking about it. ‘I will take Pap home with me.’

Then they were finished, the package neatly addressed, delivered to the post office, on its way to Lynnnatta at last. ‘Now we swim,’ said Tom. ‘In the ocean.’ They walked back to the Smiths with the cat, and by the time Mrs. Meyer had made them a picnic snack, Pap was sound asleep on the couch pillow. ‘In the bay,’ Kristen answered.

It was hot and humid, and by the time they crossed the tar road and walked through the sand and rushes toward Jamaica Bay, Kristen felt sticky and irritable. She raced into the water, arms stretched, diving deep, feeling the cold bay closing over her, and then she was up again, feeling washed and cool, the sun warmed her face. She brushed her hair back away from her eyes.

Tom, she had forgotten him. He was standing on the edge, his feet dug into the sand, waiting. Kristen swam back toward him, as close as she could without scraping the bottom. ‘You have to float

first,’ she said. ‘Don’t even try to swim yet.’ She had said that a dozen times the other day He took a step into the water. ‘I have no time to fool around with floating.’ He had said that a dozen times too. He sounded the way she did over practicing the piano. I have no time to fool around.

‘Thick as a piece of wood,’ Sister Jillen would have said about him. It was what she always said when she was teaching math problems, and someone could not understand.

But there was something else. He was afraid of the water; she was sure of it. She told him to loosen up, to lie back

and drift with the water. She told him to unclench his fists and pretend he was one of the reeds, floating.

She told him all the things Gram had told her when she was learning. But it did not do any good. He could not float.

He could not swim either. They tried that next. Noah was like a cat who did not want to get wet, or a bird weighed down with feathers.

‘You are a terrible teacher,’ he said, trying to joke.

She bit down on her lip, feeling sorry for him. ‘It takes time. That’s what

Gram always says.' She shook her head. 'I can't believe I'm sounding like Gram.'

'You are lucky... 'he began and stopped.

She held up her hand. 'You don't have to tell me,' She said. 'I know it. I've been thinking about you and Nagymamma, but you don't know what a pain Gram is.'

He smiled a little. 'Nagymamma was a pain sometimes too. We had to say Kerem and köszönöm, and szívesen every two minutes... 'Please,' and 'Thank you,' and 'You're welcome...'

‘She didn’t teach you very well,’ Kristen said, smiling too. ‘Here I’m wasting time showing you how to swim, and you haven’t said kos whatever once.’

‘For teaching me how to drown myself?’ Then his face was suddenly serious. ‘It is August, Kristen.’

She took a breath. ‘Maybe we should forget about Europe,’ she said. ‘Maybe the war will be over in a year.’

‘A year,’ he said, sounding as if it were forever.

She tried to think of what else to say, but he was watching her, and she

could not even look into his eyes. ‘All right,’ she said.

‘I guess we could try again after lunch.’

‘I hope I can do this.’ Noah sounded worried.

Kristen rowed across the bay, moving swiftly, pulling hard on the oars. She would not have to tell him. He would tell her to go without him, and then she would say…

She looked across at him. His face was white, his lips pale.

She threw the anchor into the water. ‘Now we’ll go over the side. The boat isn’t going anywhere, and if you get in trouble you can reach for one of the tall reeds.’

Tom’s eyes were almost closed.

‘I’ll go first,’ she said and went over the side slowly, Carefully, so the boat would not rock. She hung on to the edge with both hands for a second, getting used to the feel of the water, cooling her body, then slipped away from the boat. ‘Don’t forget, Tom. Keep your mouth closed. Last time...’

‘I know.’ He was clumsy getting over the side, rocking the boat enough to create small waves. And then he was in the water, reaching up to grip the side.

‘Let go,’ she said. ‘You’ve got on a life preserver. You can’t sink.’ She grinned. ‘Even you can’t sink.’

He shut his eyes and let go.

‘Good,’ she said, treading water. ‘Feel how lovely. Not too cold. Open your eyes, will you?’

He struck out with one arm and then the other.

‘Kick your feet, remember?’

He opened his eyes. ‘Too much to remember all at once.’ He was out of breath.

‘Take your time.’

He started again, head high.

‘Not bad, not bad at all, but wait a minute.’ She swam over to him, thinking he looked like a turtle. Land turtles. ‘What do you think will happen if you just put your head in the water?’

‘Remember last time?’

‘Yes, but your mouth was wide open. Duck your head. Just feel…’

He took a deep breath and leaned forward. A moment later he was up again. ‘I can hardly stay down.’ He sounded surprised, pleased.

‘See,’ she said. ‘Nothing’s going to happen.’

He nodded once, and then a second time. ‘You are right, Kristen.’

He leaned into the water again, raising his arm. She could see his feet behind him, kicking a little, kicking harder. He was moving. He was swimming.

She watched as he circled the boat, then floated, his hands pale in the water, fingers spread. ‘I am swimming,’ he told her.

‘I know,’ she answered him, thinking she had done it. She had taught him to swim. And then something else. She would have to tell him they could not go to Europe.

The sea was high today. Kristen tried to remember when she had last seen it this way, yellow-green water reflecting the strange color in the sky. They had rowed only a short way from the porch, still in the bay, to fish.

She dropped her fishing line over the side of the rowboat. The day was hot, the wormy bait sticky on her fingers. She felt sick with the smell of it, sick thinking about what Noah would say when she told him.

It had been a terrible day from start to finish. The library had been closed for days, and when they had finally got there this morning, Mrs. Hailey had not been a bit friendly. ‘Bringing sand in on your feet,’ she had grumbled. ‘Leaving a trail behind you like Hansel and Gretel.’

And then when Kristen had tried to get both books, The Story of Roland

and The Promise, Mrs. Hailey had looked up over her glasses. ‘Don’t you have a book at home, overdue?’

Kristen had remembered she had left The Three Musketeers at the beach, and when she began to make something up, Mrs. Hailey had sighed. ‘Don’t, Kristen.’ She had said.

It had ended up that all she got was The Story of Roland, which she had already read, and what good was that? And she had thought Mrs. Hailey was her friend.

Noah was going on about meeting a ship. ‘It will go to France. I think it will. I know it will. I will start in Paris. I will go to every hospital. I will go everywhere. I have the money. I will buy what

I need. I will find her, do not worry.’

Werry.

Kristen took a breath. ‘Who’s going to take care of Pap?’

Noah looked over the side of the boat, as if he could see the bottom, as if he were searching for a flounder. ‘The

Smiths, of course. They will do that for me. Don’t you think so?’

‘I have to tell you…' Kristen began.

But Noah was singing now. He paused. ‘I will teach her this song from your radio,’ and he began again. ‘‘You must accent-tchu-eat…’'

‘Tom.’

Kristen had dreamed about Lynnnatta, and Eddie too, but when she awoke, she could not remember much more than that. She knew she had been

crying in the dream. She was still crying when she opened her eyes.

Gram was standing next to her bed. ‘It was only a dream, Kristen.’ she said.

Kristen leaned up on one arm. Poppy had been in the dream, and Christy, but Kristen had not seen her face, just her hair, dark and shiny like Tom’s, and there was something about Madeline, the book Madeline.

Gram sat down on the edge of the bed. ‘What is it?

What’s the matter?’

She stuck out her lower lip. ‘If you want to learn, it’ll be faster in the bay. And that’s my final offer.’

‘I do not know what that means,’ he said.

‘You don’t have to.’ She unwrapped his hand from her arm and scrambled to her feet. ‘I’m going to put Eddie’s picture back in the living room now, and then I’m going to the bay to swim. If you want to come with me, fine. If not, too bad.’

She marched into the living room and dusted the end table with her arm.

She thought of Eddie on a beach in Normandy. She had seen newspaper films: Nazi pillboxes set into the rocks, firing; soldiers in the sand, some of them dead, everything confused. They had to get off the beaches before they could begin to free the French cities.

Kristen put Eddie's picture on the table and ran her fingers over his face. 'Be just a little lost,' she whispered. He was smiling in the picture, and she could remember him smiling the same way when she had met him coming out of the movie, or at Mrs. Sherman's, or on the way to church. She wondered if he could

count as a friend even though he was much older. ‘What do you think, Eddie?’ she asked.

‘Christy talks to herself all the time,’ Noah said.

Kristen marched past him and out the door. ‘Are you coming?’

Noah looked up at the ceiling, blinking, trying to decide.

At the same moment, Pap darted between their legs and out the door.

Noah reached for her, and so did Kristen.

She was halfway down the path before they caught up. ‘She’s growing,’ Kristen said, scooping the cat into her arms and bringing her into the house.

Noah nodded. ‘I could bring her back to Canada, I think.’

‘Good,’ Kristen said.

‘But I am not going back to Canada,’ Noah said.

‘Remember? I am going to Europe.’

‘And- I’m going to the bay,’ Kristen said.

‘I guess I will come too,’ he said.

Kristen did not answer. She marched out the door, taking a deep breath.

‘Things are never going to be the same,’ she said. ‘Not even when the war is over. Noah might not have his grandmother.

He might not have Christy.’

‘Everything is so confused over there. A flood of people has come from the rest of Europe, soldiers...’ Gram sighed. ‘If our army can get across France, if they can liberate Paris, then

maybe someone can get to Christy.' She shook her head. 'But you are right, Kristen. things will not be the same. We'll all be changed, all of us who lived through this.'

'But Poppy said it would be the same.'

'I know.' Gram patted her shoulder. 'He wanted it to be the same for you.'

Kristen took a breath. She thought of Lynnnatta not remembering Eddie's face. Kristen could see his face so clearly, even without the picture.

And- Eddie’s picture was standing there on the Dillons’ living room table. It would take her only five minutes to wrap it and bring it down to the post office this morning. If only…

Suppose she told Gram? Gram was sitting there next to her, twisting her long hair with both hands, redoing her bun, looking worried. She could tell Gram she would never go into the

Dillons’ houses again if she could just get the picture to Lynnnatta.

Gram was standing up now, picking yesterday's clothes up off the floor. 'Just a mess in here.'

Kristen blew a breath through her mouth. 'I need some money.'

Gram blinked. 'How did you get from Christy to needing money?'

'I lost my tan purse,' Kristen said slowly.

'Oh, Kristen.' Gram shook her head. 'If only you'd think sometimes...'

Kristen slung her legs out from under her quilt. 'Never mind.'

‘How much?’

Kristen twitched one shoulder. ‘I don’t remember.’

She went into the bathroom and yanked on her bathing suit. It was still damp yesterday. Gram was saying something, but Kristen turned on the water, blasting it into the sink, and began to brush her teeth.

When she came out, her breakfast was on the table, juice, and Rice Krispies with bananas and strawberries sliced on top, a face with a smiling mouth.

And Noah was sitting there, talking to Gram.

Kristen ran her fingers through her hair to comb it, then sat across from him. She reached for her juice and took a gulp.

They were talking about music again. Noah was telling Gram that his violin was still in Hungary. ‘In a blue case,’ he said, ‘maybe in my bedroom where I put it.’ He grinned at Kristen. ‘If I had it here, we could play duets.’

Gram was laughing, and Kristen frowned, but then she laughed too. She

could just see skinny Noah playing the violin, playing some wonderful Hungarian thing, and she would be doing the C scale from one end of the piano to the other.

Gram patted her head. ‘I love to hear you laugh, Kristen.’

And- Noah nodded. ‘She is like my sister, Christy.’

Gram was on her way out. ‘Going to catch a fish,’ she said. ‘I’m not going to do another thing all day but spend time in that rowboat and feel that ocean underneath me.’

Then she was gone. Kristen watched her through the screen, going down to the rowboat, her fishing rod in one hand. And then she noticed Noah was wearing his bathing suit and one of Mr. Meyer's old shirts. She knew he was hoping she would teach him to swim this morning.

Kristen stood up, finishing her cereal in a couple of Spoonfuls. 'I still need the money for Lynnnatta,' she said. 'I thought of telling Gram...'

Noah nodded. 'I was thinking about that too,' he said. 'I have the money.'

‘No.’ She shook her head. ‘Fifty dollars is so much… too much.’

‘From my aunt,’ Noah said. ‘I asked her for money.’

‘Mrs. Meyer? You told Mrs. Meyer?’

‘No. I just asked, ‘Could I have…’ and before I could finish, she said I should have some money to spend for myself. She said she never thought of it.’ Noah was pulling money out. A dollar in one pocket. Fifty cents in another.

Kristen started in on ‘The Blue Danube’ again with one finger of her right

hand and added some dum dum's with the left hand.

Footsteps were coming around the side of the house. She stood up, still playing, as the top of Tom's head passed the window, then backed up, and his face came into view.

'I thought we were going to...' He held up the rolled-up towel.

'Kristen, are you playing?' Gram called.

'Hold your horses,' Kristen told Tom. 'I can't get out of here for another twenty-two minutes.'

‘Kristen.' Gram called again.

Kristen stretched up on the bench to get a good look at Tom. ‘Besides,’ she told him, ‘I’ve got a surprise for you. Listen to what I am playing. It’s for you, special.’

She plunked herself down on the bench again and began to play ‘The Blue Danube’ as nicely as she could.

After a minute, she heard a noise. Was Noah laughing again? She ended ‘The Blue Danube’ with a crash and began the C scale again.

She could hear Gram at the back door telling Noah to come in for some iced tea while he waited. Good grief. She opened the John Thompson book to the piece she knew best, the piece she had played a million times last winter. She could hear Gram and Noah talking in the kitchen. The clock was not moving.

She began to play. She hit the wrong note with her left pinky. It sounded horrible. For a minute there was silence in the kitchen.

Kristen went back to the C scale, played it one last time, but softly now as if she knew what she was doing. Then she

slid off the seat and went into the kitchen. Noah and Gram were talking about music, but not about the piano, about violin music. Noah was telling Gram about the lessons he had taken, and Gram, her head to one side, was listening, nodding.

'Come on, Tom,' Kristen said, feeling ready to scream, 'We've got stuff to do, remember? We can't hang around here all day.'

'I'm so glad.' She wanted to hug him. She reached for his hand, warm and dry, and he squeezed back.

They spent the next half hour taking care of the picture. They cut up a paper bag and found cardboard and a ball of string in Mrs. Dillon’s closet.

Pap loved it, the noise, and the crinkling of paper as they wrapped the picture in layers of cardboard, and the ball of string to bat across the kitchen floor. But Lynnnatta’s house was spoiled for Kristen. She wondered what would happen if Mrs. Dillon found out Kristen had been in her house all summer. And she would find out. She would see the picture and ask Lynnnatta.

17

They were at Lynnnatta’s house, sitting on the kitchen floor, with Tom’s coat in front of them. The coat was navy blue wool, scratchy against Kristen’s fingers. She poked Gram’s manicure scissors into the collar seam, trying to slide the points under the tiny stitches. Noah was leaning over her shoulder, and Pap was playing with her sneaker lace.

Kristen could feel the perspiration running down her back, the metal scissors sliding in her slippery fingers, when Noah began to talk, grinning. ‘Hungarians play ‘The Blue Danube’ too,’ he said.

‘It never sounded like that.’

‘Like what?’

He looked down at the coat. ‘Like terrible. Like Christy plays.’ He smiled. ‘Christy likes to play duets. Loud.’

Swallowed. ‘I don’t want to play the piano anyway. It takes too much time, and…’ She would like Christy. ‘You should try it,’ Kristen said. ‘Hanging around on the bench, trying to…’

‘In my grandmother’s restaurant,’ Noah said slowly, ‘I played the violin on Sunday. I played that song, and ‘Vienna Life,’ which is my grandmother’s favorite.’

He stopped. ‘I loved the violin, Kristen. If only I could have taken it with me…’

He took a breath. ‘In Kalocsa’s, Nagymamma’s restaurant, people ate goulash. They had rolls with sweet butter. For dessert, they ate rigojancsi, and gesztenyepüre, or placentas.’

‘What…’

‘Palacsintas are pancakes. They’re filled with jam or chocolate.’

Kristen looked up.

‘Nagymamma gave me plain ones, cold ones, folded over.

She put them in my coat pocket when I left.'

Kristen knew he was ready to cry, but she could not think what to say. She just kept snipping at the collar until there was a wide opening in the seam. Without looking, she pushed the coat toward him and watched as he edged his thumb and index finger gently into the seam. He worked the bills out, laying each one on the floor next to them. 'These are Magyar money,' he said. 'We call them forints. And this one is an English pound.'

He did not have to tell her about the next, a fifty-dollar bill, worn and

creased. ‘Nagymamma did not know where we were going. She had to guess about the money.’

Looked at him, thinking about going to another country without Poppy or Gram, without even knowing where she was going. ‘Where is... ‘she began. Noah reached down for the cat. He held her up to his face, rubbing her soft fur on his cheek. ‘Nagymamma might be in her house. She might be in prison. I do not know.’

Kristen thought of her mother, who had died, but had died of something wrong with her heart, and not in prison,

but at home in St. Paul's. Kristen touched the money on the floor beside her, patted it the way she patted her stars. It was as if she could almost see Tom's grandmother, who had touched it last.

The cat put its tiny needle claws into Tom's shoulder as he reached over to put his fingers into the coat seam again. And now there was a tiny picture with three faces. Tom, of course, with that mop of hair, and an old woman, with a lined face and little round glasses, and a girl. The girl had curls like Tom's, but they were softer, smoother, and she was laughing.

‘Christy,’ Kristen said.

‘Yes.’ Noah looked down at the picture again; then put it carefully in his pocket. He folded most of the money and put that in his pocket too. Then he handed her fifty dollars. ‘Here, for

Eddie’s picture.’

She looked down at the money. ‘We can’t-’

‘My grandmother would not mind. She would be glad, I think.’

Shock her head. ‘Don’t you see? We could never go to the post office with all this money. They would ask where we

had gotten it. They'd tell my grandmother.'

Noah raised one shoulder. 'It is too much money, then?'

'More than I've ever seen at once,' Kristen said.

Noah scooped up the money and stuffed it back into the coat. He sat back on his heels and put the cat down on the floor. 'I guess we should not use Hungarian money. That is not so much.'

Kristen grinned. 'I don't think so. Nobody around here has ever seen Hungarian money.'

‘No.’ He grinned back.

But then Kristen heard the church bells. Four times. Four o’clock. The post office was closed, and poor Lynnnatta would have to go another day without the picture.

Kristen sighed. ‘I’ll teach you to swim, Tom. We’ll go over to the bay now, and I’ll figure out how to get money before tomorrow.’

‘Not the bay,’ he said, ‘the ocean.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous.’

‘I do not know what that means, ‘ridiculous.’'

She narrowed her eyes. He knew very well what it meant.

‘You can’t learn to swim in that rough water.’

He reached forward to grab her arm. ‘Do you know that Christ is waiting for me? Do you know that summer will be over, and I will have to go back to Canada...?’

She nodded. ‘I’ll have to go back to St. Paul’s, and Sister Sara in the sixth grade.’

‘Please.’ He was holding her arm so hard now she could feel each one of his

fingers tightening around it. His eyes were so blue, and she knew it was never going to happen the way he wanted, and it was all her fault... all because of her wild stories.

'Oh yes, Kristen. I will learn to swim, and you will row.'

18

Next, to her, Gram took her silver rosary beads out of their case, and on her other side, Mrs. Colgan opened her missal.

In a moment Father Murphy was out at the altar beginning the Mass, and

Kristen began to pray for Eddie, and then for Poppy.

She prayed for Tom's sister too, and his grandmother.

Kristen put Eddie's picture on the table next to the couch and went onto the porch to find her Sunday clothes, even though it was not Sunday.

Just ten minutes later, she was walking into church, stopping for a quick dip of holy water, and sliding into a pew next to Gram.

As she knelt there and waited for Father Murphy to begin, the sun-blasted

in around the partly opened stained-glass windows. It felt as if it must be a hundred degrees. The fan in front did not do any good. It just moved the fringe a little on the banner that hung over their heads.

It was a dessert in that church. She lifted the brim of her straw hat away from her head and fanned the air with her hymnbook, watching Mrs. Meyer come up the aisle with Noah until Gram gave her a poke.

Kristen tried to imagine what it must feel like to be Eddie, to have been taken prisoner by the Germans or just somewhere by himself, hurt.

Father Murphy had hung the banner there himself. On its white background were rows of blue stars, one for each of the men from the parish who were in the service. There was one gold star in the middle. That was for a sailor who used to live near the Cross-Bay Theatre. He had been killed at Pearl Harbor. And now, in a day or two, there would be a silver star for Eddie Dillon, who was missing, lost somewhere on a beach in France, and no one knew if they would ever find him.

Gram put her hand up to her mouth. ‘A phone call from Willow Run to

Mrs. Tannenbaum's candy store. We're on our way to church... a special Mass and we're going to pray as hard...' She took a breath. 'We're all praying, I guess, the entire world, that this will be over soon.' She blinked back tears. 'And right now, we're going to pray for Eddie, and your father, and Tom's family, and everyone who-' She broke off.

I watched her make careful, even numbers on the paper and turn it over as Gram came back into the kitchen, another one of my films in her hand.

I did not take any chances, though. Throughout the rest of the

dinner, I said the phone number over in my head. I wanted to be sure I would remember it.

Films of Kristen Deniel

I never showed this picture to anyone: the golden field, me with my head back laughing, my hands at the wheel of the truck. It took four or five pencils to do this: I started with Summer Green, Iron Gray, and Beach Sand. That was something, that Saturday night.

Izzy and the Old Man were going to the movie in town.

‘It's a romance,’ the Old Man said, waggling his eyebrows at me.

‘A waste of a good evening.’

‘You'll love it, John,’ Izzy said. ‘There are snacks in the refrigerator and the cabinet. Snacks all over the place. You won't starve.’ She leaned out the door. ‘And there's a tin of that hard candy on my dresser.’

Green crossed his eyes. ‘They're so sour they curl your tongue.’

‘Not mine.’ I had been eating them all summer; I could not get enough of them.

‘That's because-’ he began. I knew he was going to joke about my being sour.

But the Old Man came out the door. ‘I just saw the mess you left in the shed,’ he told Green’s. ‘Straighten that place up.

It's bad enough your room looks the way it does.’

‘What's this neatness kick?’

‘Did you notice how neat Holly's things are?’

Without thinking, I put my hand up. ‘Don't…’ I began, but it came out like

a breath. Neither one of them heard, or they just were not paying attention.

Green unfolded himself from his chair so slowly, it seemed as if he were not moving.

‘Hang in there, Kristen Copses,’ Green is said as the Old Man stamped around the side of the house and started the car.

‘We're going to be out of here in five minutes.’

‘Where?’ Already he was running around the side of the house to the shed.

I sat there listening as he threw things around for a few minutes, and then he was back. ‘I'm going to teach you to drive. Good thing they took the car instead of the truck.’ He dangled the keys in front of my nose. ‘Anyone who can keep her things disinfected can drive a truck.’

‘I don't think-’ I began.

‘Scared?’

‘Never.’

‘All right, don't waste my valuable time arguing.’

In the back of the evergreens and the row of holly bushes was a flat field.

The Old Man kept it mowed against snakes, rattlers that struck blind in the summer. ‘Don't worry,’ Green’s said, sliding into the truck. ‘No one's been bitten for about a hundred years. Pop worries about everything.’

Green drove as if he had been doing it all his life. He grinned across at me in the suicide seat. ‘Since I was about eight,’ he said, knowing what I was thinking. ‘I'm going to take the truck up the mountain one day.’

He showed me the gears and the pedals, and then we switched seats. And so, I drove in that field in the summer

evening light, green’s shouting directions as I lurched through the ruts, bucking, stalling, starting up again with gear-grinding noises.

‘Aha, Kristen Copses,’ he yelled. ‘There's hope for you. I knew it!’

I pressed my foot down on the gas pedal a little harder.

‘Yahoo!’ I yelled. ‘It's me, driving a pickup truck!’

19

Films of Kristen Deniel

One raw Tuesday morning I awoke and pulled the shade aside; the trees were charcoal smudges against an iron-gray sky. Gram would not be up for another hour or two. I had not done my homework the night before, had not even thought of it. I had fallen asleep watching television with Henry next to me on the couch and Gram working at the kitchen table.

I still faced rows of math problems. Three pages, four. And there was a social studies composition on Henry Hudson.

I tried to decide whether I could work on it now. It was early. I popped the bread into the toaster and opened a can of Salmon Delight for Henry, who sniffed at it and walked away.

‘I can never figure you out,’ I said and buttered a square of toast for him instead. Then I pulled my books off the shelf and sat at the table with one of Gram's knitted shawls around me.

In front of me, I had the radio on. Two weeks until Christmas. It had snowed upstate, six inches.

Ah, snow for Green’s. Were they up yet, the three of them?

Were they having breakfast in their winter house in Hancock? What would it be like if I were there, doing my homework, eating at Izzy's apple pancakes?

The radio announcer said it was a foggy day on Long Island three minutes before eight o'clock.

I finished the first page of math problems; I could never do the rest in a half hour. Never mind Henry Hudson sailing up the river.

I could take one more day off. Just one. I grabbed my jacket and pad and went out the back door, holding it open for Henry to come too. The canal would be wonderful this morning, with a mist rising off the water. And all the while I jogged toward the jetty, I knew it was a mistake. But still, I kept going.

When I got to the pier, I sat, hands clenched in my pocket against the cold, my legs dangling, watching the fisher on the DanBar-J gear up to go out for blues. He knew me now and waved. Last week he had even dropped a flounder on the bench for me. I had pan-

fried it with a little butter, and Gram had put two dusty pink candles on the table, like a party.

Henry had loved his share. He had not scratched at me once when I put his plate down in front of him on the radio. ‘Ah,’ I had said, pleased with him. ‘You'd do anything for a handout.’

Now I watched the fingers of fog drift over the water while Henry sat nearby, washing one mangy leg. It was the kind of day I loved. I could not see the end of the pier, and no one could see me from there. I could hear the fisher from the DanBar-J, though.

‘Want a job?’ He called.

He was not thinking about school either.

A job? Why not? There would be money for cat food, a couple of cans of ravioli. I had not had ravioli since the stucco house.

I nodded and found myself hosing down the deck of the Dan-Bar-J. As I scrubbed at the dried-on pieces of fish with a wire brush, I spent the money in my mind.

He handed me three crumpled-up bills. I smoothed them out, and then as I

gave him a half wave, he reached into his pocket and gave me another dollar.

I could not wait to get back to Gram. She would pat her scarf around her neck and fuss with her hat. We would sail up and down the aisles of DeMattia's Food Store, choosing ravioli, and a pink can of shredded tuna for Henry. Some marmalade, too, to have with the English muffins we had left.

I had forgotten all about homework, and school, and even the hot cocoa woman. Henry and I headed home as the fog lifted and the sun appeared behind the trees. It was going to be a

beautiful day, a day for a picnic on the rock jetty.

I pulled open the back door and stopped. Above the newscaster's voice on the radio-’Nine-thirty and still snowing in upstate Philadelphia’-was the sound of voices in the living room.

Henry heard them too. He scampered back outside to sit on the bench, an irritable look on his skinny face.

I thought about scampering with him. I knew who it must be. But how could I leave Gram alone with her? Instead, I shrugged out of my jacket, put

my pad on the table, and lifted my chin as I went toward the front of the house.

The hot cocoa woman sat on the lilac couch, and Gram sat in the chair opposite. They both had cups of coffee in their hands.

Good move, Gram, I thought. Her coffee was great, dark, and rich, as the advertisements went.

I nodded at the hot cocoa woman and sank in the third chair, facing the window, looking out as if something wonderful were going on right there in the front yard.

They talked about old movies and the wonderful colors in the living room; they talked about coffee waking them up, and all the time my heart was pounding. Without looking at the hot cocoa woman's face, I knew she was straining at the conversation, that this was not what she wanted to say.

She was wearing sweats… Did she ever wear anything else? I could see around the creamy spot on her chest. She had spilled her coffee. What was the matter with that woman, anyway?

But Gram looked fine, Gram looked wonderful, with that slash of red

across her mouth, a silky green dress that looked like the sea. I knew she was groping, though. She had no idea who the woman sitting across from her was.

At last, the hot cocoa woman put down her cup. ‘Kristen,’ she said, ‘I know I'm keeping you from school.’

I waved my hand. No problem, lady.

She looked at Gram then. ‘I think, Mrs. Cahill, that we need to talk about another place for Kristen.’

Gram sat up straight. I could see her thin hands on the coffee cup

trembling a little, her mouth, too. ‘Kristen is leaving?’

They both looked at me.

‘I've found a family for her,’ the hot cocoa woman said. ‘A mother and father with a three-year-old boy and a dog.’ She kept leaning forward, trying to make me look at her. ‘I remember you like dogs, Kristen.’

‘Sharks,’ I said, ‘and barracudas, not dogs.’

‘A family would be nice,’ Gram said.

Too late, I thought.

‘But not today,’ the hot cocoa woman said. ‘It will be a few days. I want Kristen to meet them first. They are not so far from here. You and Mrs. Cahill will be able to visit sometimes, Kristen.’

She stood up then. ‘I'll stay connected,’ she said. ‘Would you like me to drive you to school now?’

I shook my head. ‘I can walk.’

She turned to go.

‘’ I said. ‘You have a sticker on the back of that shirt. X-L.’

She tried to look over her shoulder.

‘Extra-large,’ I said, feeling mean.

You can’t wear those things,’ Kristen told him after they had fed the cat and were walking along the road. ‘I’m not going to march along the beach with someone who-’

‘You said you wanted to go out on the rocks,’ Noah said.

‘Not with a baby who has beach slippers on his feet,’ she told him, grinning.

He grinned back, looking down at his feet. ‘My aunt said I would come back with cuts from the bar-nackles…’

‘Barnacles,’ she said. ‘Not bar-nackles.’

‘Same thing.’ He reached down to pull off Mr. Meyer’s slippers and toss them into the marshes.

She nodded. ‘Don’t worry, they’ll still be there when we get back. Nobody in the world is going to want them.’

She led him down the path, across the sand, toward the jetty, and began to hop along the rocks. ‘See,’ she said, looking back. ‘Nothing to it.’

He followed her slowly, one foot at a time, wincing.

‘Didn’t you ever walk around barefoot in Hungary?’ She asked.

‘Certainly not,’ he said. ‘Do you think we were poor, that we had no shoes?’

She was laughing again, thinking about her feet, tough as leather, and Tom, his first summer, going barefoot. She settled herself on the gray triangular rock, way out, with Noah next to her, the sun on her face, and the sound of the water lapping against the rocks.

‘I want to tell you something,’ she said after a while. ‘I have stars on my

bedroom ceiling. My mother passed them all up for me when I was a baby. She told my father she was making a world for me. She said she wanted to give me the entire world.'

Noah was not looking at her, his head was turned, but he was sitting there so still, so unmoving, she knew how hard he was listening.

'I bring one with me to Ridgway every year,' she said. 'I counted. There are dozens of them left on my ceiling. I'll be thirty or forty before they're all used up.'

He nodded a little.

‘I never told anyone,’ She said. ‘Not even Poppy. I give them presents to me from my mother, every year on my birthday, in July.’ She took a breath. It was so nice to tell someone about the stars. It was so nice to talk about her mother as if she, Kristen. were like everyone else, like everyone who had a mother.

‘I know your mother is dead,’ he said, looking at her now, reaching out for the tiniest second to touch her shoulder. ‘My aunt told me.’

Kristen squinted a little, looking out at a curl of smoke from a freighter far out. She waited for him to say something more about them, but when he did not, she began again. ‘My mother had something wrong with her heart. It was too big. She died right in Poppy’s bedroom on a sunny day.’ She took a breath. ‘I think that’s an all-right way to die, but it’s not all right that I don’t remember her.’

‘A picture?’ he asked. ‘You have a picture?’

‘Poppy has a book with her films, but they’re blurry, and I don’t know what her voice was like. You know?’

She could see his teeth chewing on his lower lip. She opened the paper bag from Gram: two sandwiches, Spam, apples, Social Tea cookies.

‘I hate this,’ she said, handing one of the sandwiches to him. ‘Gram does too. After the war, we are never going to have one can of Spam again. And Poppy says if we have any left in the kitchen cabinet, he’s going to throw them right in the ocean.’

Noah had a mouthful of it. ‘I like this,’ he said. ‘I like everything. My grandmother, Nagymamma, loved to cook for me.

She said I was her best...’ He closed his eyes, trying to think.
‘Customer,’ Kristen said, watching him nod, as she tried to get her mouth around the word. ‘Nahj...’

‘It means a big mother, grandmother. The Nagy part just means big.’

Kristen took a tiny piece of Spam and tossed it into the water. ‘For the fish,’

she said. ‘They probably don’t like it either.’

‘You know my mother is dead too, and my father,’ he said.

Both, she thought. She could not picture what it would be like with Poppy dead. So terrible...

‘They are dead because they had a newspaper. They wrote sad things about Hitler and the Nazis. And their friends would give out the papers. They were caught one day. The Nazis came to the house...’

Kristen let out her breath. She did not want to look into his eyes, but she could not help it, she glanced at him quickly, but he did not look as if he would cry. He was squinting at the water, his eyes dry. ‘Nagymamma came for me, for Christy and me, just before they came to our house. And there was no time, not one minute. We did not say goodbye, my mother was running into the kitchen, trying to burn small pieces of paper at the stove, and she looked over her shoulder and told us, ‘Grannie,’ and then she looked back because the stove was hot, and she was almost burning her fingers.’

Kristen was biting her lip, chewing on her lip, watching a small fish tear a piece of the Spam, and then another. . .

‘It means ‘I love you,’ ‘he said before she could ask. ‘But if they loved us, they would not have done that, they would not have bothered with newspapers. And we do not even know what happened to them. Nagymamma just got a postcard from the police that they were dead.’

‘Oh, Tom,’ Kristen said, thinking how angry he looked, thinking she was

angry too. Poppy should have stayed home.

‘And we went to Austria, Christy, and me, in the back of Mr. Kovacs’s car, and then across to Switzerland. Mr. Kovacs promised he was going to sneak us across Europe. In Switzerland, Christy was sick with’-he touched is face-’ marks.’

‘Chickenpox?’

He shook his head.

‘Measles.’

‘Yes, and we had been traveling for so long, and Christy had a fever, a big fever, I knew it. I could not tell anyone.’

He shook his head, and Kristen could see him making fists of his hands.

‘We still had to cross the mountains into France,’ he said. ‘Mr. Kovacs was pretending we were his children, and the Nazis were there, right there.’ He was almost breathless, telling her. ‘We had to get to the ship that would take us to America.’ He stopped for a moment. ‘I was afraid they would not let Christy go.’

Kristen could not look at him. She tore off another piece of Spam for the fish and the crust of her bread.

‘In France, she was so thirsty. Her face was red, and she was burning.’ Noah stood up, balancing himself on the rock, watching the ship, a little closer now. He pointed to the end of the jetty, across the water. ‘Christy is in France, and so are the Nazis.’

‘But how...’

Noah sighed. ‘We were waiting for the ship to take us to America, and this lady who was helping us, this lady with a long gray dress that went to the ground and across...’ He raised his hands to his head. ‘She was wearing a white...’ He stopped and frowned.

‘Something on her head?’ Kristen asked. ‘Was it a nun?’

‘Yes. And she said, ‘This girl is sick. She belongs to a hospital and not on a ship. She will give the sickness to everyone else.’

‘Measles.’

‘Yes, but I said it was not measles. I said she could not go to a hospital, but later I fell asleep, and they took her, and I did not even say goodbye.’

Kristen swallowed.

‘Now Christy is in France until the war is over. The war may last forever,

and Christy is in a convent, with the lady in the gray dress, and the Nazis are right there, and suppose they find out about our newspaper in Hungary?'

'Wait, Tom,' Kristen began. 'Isn't Hungary far away from

France? How would they know?'

Noah did not stop. 'Nagymamma said to stay together, no matter what. She said as long as we did, we'd have a family.'

He looked around and picked up the bag with the apples.

20

It was late on Monday night. Still, in shorts and a shirt, Kristen lay under her red quilt looking up at the sky. She could see Orion's Belt and the W of Cassiopeia. They were sharp and clear among the other stars in the dark sky. It was a beautiful night, and finally, she and Noah were going to watch for convoys.

She thought about it a little uneasily. They had not talked about Kristen's going to Europe since that day at the beach. He had forgotten, she told herself, or he had thought it over by now and knew she had been lying.

She turned into the bed, trying to put it out of her mind. Everything was ready for tonight, on the floor. A sweater, two towels, her sneakers tucked in one side of her beach bag, and two bottles of soda jammed into the other side.

If only Gram would go to sleep. Vaguely she heard Gram's radio, the end of Lux Radio Theatre, and then music. 'Would you like to swing on a star?' She could not keep her eyes open.

Then suddenly she was awake, wide awake. It seemed extremely late, midnight, one o'clock. Gram's radio was

off, and all the lights. Kristen reached for the screen and pushed it up and out.

She dropped into the rowboat and pushed herself along under the porches. In the light that spilled out from the less of Mrs. Colgan's blackout shades, she could see a mess of sand crabs hanging on to the pilings.

And at the Smiths,' just silence. She sat there as wide awake as if it were the middle of the morning, so angry at herself for sleeping, so disappointed Noah was asleep, she could have cried.

'Too much crying,' she said aloud.

‘Too much talking to yourself,’ a voice said, so close she jumped.

Noah dropped into the boat. He was clumsy and splashed water over the side. ‘Because of the cat,’ he said.

She leaned over until she could see the cat’s face, its eyes peering out from the front of his open jacket. ‘Cats hate the water.’

‘This one does not. I thought you would not come.’

She opened her mouth, ready to lie, but raised one shoulder instead. ‘I fell asleep.’

Noah nodded. ‘It is hard to stay awake sometimes.’

Kristen pushed the boat out from under the porches. ‘Here’s what we’ll do. We will cut across the bay. That way we can stay away from the surf.’

‘But it is closer the other way.’

‘Yes, but it’s harder to fight the surf than the bay. If you’re going far you want to save your arms.’

He nodded, watching her pull on the oars.

‘Will you teach me to swim?’ he asked after a while.

She blinked. She had been thinking again about Poppy... Poppy on a troopship watching her swim toward him. It was a wonderful dream. ‘Swim?’ she repeated. ‘Yes. But why can’t you swim?’

‘I did not have an ocean,’ he said. Like Lynnnatta in Detroit, she thought.

‘I had a river, the Danube.’ He leaned forward. ‘It runs between Buda and Pest, but the river is not blue like the waltz. It is gray, and sometimes silver.’

Kristen did not say anything. She had never heard of Budapest split up that way in two halves. She had heard of ‘The

Blue Danube,' though. It was one of the songs in her music book for the piano.

It was hard to row now. The marshes were closing in around them, and there was the dry rustle of the reeds hitting the sides of the boat and scraping the bottom.

She could see Playland now in the back of them on Ninety-ninth Street, the roller coaster, a dark skeleton, and the Ferris wheel rising behind it. In front, the boardwalk was misty, the tall lights painted black toward the sea, so German subs could not spot ships in the water nearby.

‘How long?’ Noah asked.

‘Long?’

‘To learn to swim.’ He leaned forward. ‘I want to go with you to Europe.’

She opened her mouth. Tell him right now, she told herself.

Tell him it is just too far, the water’s too rough.

‘Kristen?’

She sighed. ‘You could never learn to swim the Atlantic in the summer.

It would take months, years to be good enough, fast enough.'

'If you can do it...'

'I've been swimming since I was four,' she said. 'And remember that afternoon when I went into the surf after you, I was nearly swept under.'

He did not answer.

She took a breath, trying to think of something to convince him. 'You even said you thought I was a better swimmer.'

In the dark, she could just see him shaking his head. 'I know you are a good swimmer,' he said slowly. 'I know

you were coming for me.' He stopped for a moment. 'I was... I don't know the word...'

How could she tell him Christy now? He was the first friend she had ever made. You could not count Lynnnatta... Lynnnatta, who had been in Ridgway every summer from the time they could walk, from the time they could talk. Tom, a friend, a good friend, Kristen's best friend.

''Teasing' is the word,' he said.

She looked at him. His face was so serious. One hand was in his jacket,

petting the sleeping cat. ‘You do not want to take me,’ he said. ‘You think I will not be able to keep up.’

‘No, it isn’t that. Really,’ she said.

‘You think I am a coward because of the plane that day.’

She kept shaking her head.

He leaned forward. ‘It was just that I was thinking it was Europe.’ His lip trembled a little. ‘In Budapest, we had a yellow house with birds.’ He moved his fingers. ‘They were small birds.

Blue ones painted on the house painted on the window shutters. I had an

orange cat too, we called him Pap, after the pepper. He looks like this cat.' He tried to smile. 'And my grandmother, Nagymamma, was always telling me to do this and that, like your grandmother.'

Kristen bit her lip, trying to think of what to say.

'I have only Christy left. Christy is my family.' He stopped then and pointed. 'Look.'

She turned and saw it too. The first ship looked like a flat chunk of coal on the water, so far out she was not even sure it was a ship. But then a second one

appeared on the horizon, moving out of the mist. It was a huge ship, its top tangle of turrets and masts.

For a moment, they did not say anything. They sat there watching the rowboat rocking gently until the ship disappeared into the mist again.

‘That was a troopship,’ she said at last.

Noah leaned back. ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘I know. I will learn to swim, Kristen. to keep up, and we will go out there, out to a ship.

And- then I will go back to Europe to find Christy.’

She began to grow again, turning the boat toward the canal, her mouth dry.

Films of Kristen Deniel

Two of Izzy's candies filled my mouth as I went around the side of the house. I did not mean to listen or to be sneaky. Ordinarily, I did that a lot. I would standstill in the hall to hear what the stucco woman had to say to her telephone friend. I would flip pages on the teacher's desk to see what disaster of a mark I had gotten in social studies or

social attitude. I would pass by classmates in the schoolyard to find out what they had to say about that kid Kristen Copses.

But this time I was on my way to find Izzy, to give her a picture I had drawn Izzy flipping a pancake that would land on my plate. Izzy's pancakes were wonderful: covered with apples cut into small, sweet chunks, the pancakes themselves so light I must have eaten a half dozen. In the picture Izzy is laughing, the turner in one hand, just under the cross-stitched motto on the wall:

LOVE THE COOK.

I had changed the motto, though. I have written I DO LOVE THE COOK. I had drawn the I DO in the palest pink so that you would have to study it, study it hard, or you would not notice.

One afternoon Izzy and I had walked up to the old cemetery on the hill where her parents were buried. We picked white daisies and Queen Anne's lace and put them in the jar in front of a small stone next to her parents' grave. Izzy ran her hand over the inscription on the bottom: JOSEPH REGAN, SIX DAYS. ‘I always wanted more children,’ she said. ‘For me, for John, for Green’s.’ She patted

the stone. ‘I wanted a baby for each corner of my house. It just never happened after this.’

Down the hill, I could hear the Old Man bellow at Green’s. ‘Do they always fight?’ I asked. ‘Or…’ -I hesitated, trying to sound as if I did not care, as if it were not important-’ do you think it's because I'm here?’

Izzy grinned at me. ‘It does seem worse this summer,’ she said. ‘But they have to find their way.’

I had thought about that for days, ‘worse this summer,’ but now, as I

rounded the house, I stepped back against the wall, warm from the sun, smelling faintly of paint, and closed my eyes.

‘How can we let her go?’ Izzy was saying.

‘We can't,’ the Old Man said.

My heart began to pound so hard I thought it would come through my chest.

A mother, I thought. M.

‘She belongs here,’ Izzy said. ‘Green’s feels it too.’

B, belong. G, girl. S, sister. W for want, W for the wish, W for Wouldn't it be lovely? My head was spinning.

‘I've been thinking about it,’ Izzy said. ‘The winter house in town is too small. We'd have to put a room on for her.’

I do not need a room. A couch. Sleeping bags.

‘Without the room, I don't think the agency would let us keep her. She has to have space for herself.’

For a moment they were quiet.

I leaned my head back, my hand to my mouth.

‘How about this?’ Izzy said. ‘You could call Lenny Mitchell to work with you. There's space in the back for a great room for Kristen.’

‘A big window for her,’ the Old Man said. ‘We could do it in weeks.’

‘Sooner than weeks,’ Izzy said. ‘Early fall.’

‘Yes. Even Green’s would help.’

‘I'll call-’ ‘You'll call the agency.’

‘How long will it take them?

‘She'll have to go back first,’ Izzy said, the words tumbling over each other.

‘But just for a brief time.’

I leaned my head against the wall. I had never been so happy.

‘A daughter,’ Izzy said.

‘Yes,’ the Old Man said. ‘We'll have a daughter.’

From where I stood, I could see the mountain towering over me. The stucco woman's voice was in my head: ‘She's a mountain of trouble, that Kristen Copses.’

Before the end of the summer, I decided, I was going to climb that mountain, get to the top, raise my arms, and shout to the entire world, ‘I have a family. I belong.’

In the back of me, there was a noise. ‘Yahoo!’

Green’s. I jumped afoot.

The voices stopped, but no one knew I had heard.

Early fall and I would be a daughter.

Films of Kristen Deniel

Never mind that we did not have much money. Never mind that I did not even know exactly how to get to the house in Laurel Highlands; I would find it. Never mind that the house was not mine.

Please do not mind, I said to Izzy and the Old Man in my head.

I ticked off what to pack, what to do, counting on my fingers: Bring all the food in the cabinet over the sink, a map, winter clothes, piles of anything warm I could find in the house, then get gas at the first exit off the highway.

Gram was in the kitchen making cocoa. ‘It'll be dark soon,’ she said.

‘That's all right,’ I told her. ‘We like the dark. It's like velvet.’

‘That it is,’ she said. ‘And we like snow, too.’

I bit my lip. Dark and snow. One problem after another.

‘How about marshmallows in our cocoa?’ Gram asked.

‘Left-hand cabinet,’ I said.

To begin with, Gram and I had to get off Long Island, I knew that we had to

get to Route Seventeen and exit at Ninety, and after that, we were home free. I had walked that last few mile's dozens of times: the grocery store off the ramp, the road curving over the hill. We would cross the bridge, and the house would be there, nestled in the trees opposite Old Man's Mountain.

I could do it in my sleep.

I called back over my shoulder, reminding Gram where we were going: ‘It's a house in the Copses, Gram,’ I said. ‘A house on the river, a safe house.’

I swept half boxes of cereal off the counter into a carton, cans of chicken noodle soup, sugar, salt, anything I could find to eat, then, wasting precious time, went up to the attic for Gram's old Christmas ornaments.

I heard a car and froze on the top step. The sound of the motor grew louder and then gradually disappeared. My heart was beating fast.

Stop, I told myself. The hot cocoa woman was far away, in her house somewhere, scarfing up her dinner, littering her sweatsuit with crumbs.

But I knew we should leave as quickly as we could. I had learned that when I had run before. The first hours made all the difference, the hours before anyone knew you were gone.

I scurried into the attic, found the box of ornaments, and pulled it after me to the stairs.

When I finished, the car was piled so high it was hard to see out the windows. It was completely dark now, except for the white flakes hitting the window. In the kitchen Gram was bent over the table, a cup of cocoa in one hand,

her knife in the other, and the smooth chunk of wood in front of her.

‘Gram?’ I reached out for my cup of cocoa and sipped at it, feeling the warmth of it on my lip, the sweetness of the marshmallow in my mouth. I touched her shoulder. ‘We can't wait anymore.’

Rubbing her eyes, she glanced toward her bedroom. I knew she wanted to take a nap. I did too; I was tired now and thinking of the long trip ahead of us was too much.

‘We'll have an adventure,’ I said. ‘You, and me, and Henry.’ I hesitated. ‘If

we don't go, they might make me live somewhere else.'

She stood up. 'We'll go, then.' She looked around in the kitchen, touched the table, the back of the chair. 'Yes,' she said.

'We'll go.'

'Can you drive?' I asked.

Please let the snow stop, I thought.

She smiled. 'Of course.'

I made one last trip to the car, carrying her knives, the small drill, pieces

of wood, and then I was back, hoisting Henry onto my shoulder. ‘No biting if you don't mind,’ I told him.

We went outside, Gram looking up at the sky, holding out her hands to catch the flakes while I opened the garage doors, and then we were off, skidding our way down the street.

Suddenly- the snow did stop, and we saw a moon over our heads. ‘It looks dusty,’ Gram said. The houses stood out as clearly as if it were daytime; trees threw sharp shadows across the snowy lawns, and the dark streets curved like ribbons through that white world. I put

my head back against the headrest, thinking we had done it. The hardest part was over.

‘Do you know about directions?’ I asked.

She turned her head to one side. ‘It depends. I know the way to the end of Long Island; I know how to get upstate…’

‘Upstate, yes.’

‘Across the Triborough Bridge.’ She frowned, looking worried. ‘Isn't that, right?’

‘I think so.’ Henry was scratching around in the back, trying to make room for himself.

‘There's a map somewhere.’ Gram leaned across me, one hand off the wheel.

‘I can find it,’ I said quickly, reaching for the glove compartment. A tiny pinprick of light appeared as I snapped it open. The small space inside was filled with all kinds of things: one of Gram's silk gloves, a couple of dimes, a squished box of tissues, and at the very bottom, the map of Philadelphia State.

I unfolded it, spreading it out against the door of the glove compartment. It was a mass of color and lines and tiny words that were hard to see in that dim light. I bent over it, squinting. Palisades Parkway. Route 17. It was all there, one line after another, leading me home to Laurel Highlands.

I looked up as I heard the blare of a horn, and then a car swerved past us, its lights sweeping over the road. ‘Are you all, right?’ I asked Gram.

‘Right as rain,’ she said.

I sat back and closed my eyes, thinking of Izzy, drawing them all in my mind, wondering if they would think I was doing a terrible thing.

‘It belongs to you,’ the Old Man had said. Would he say that now? I wondered.

Why not? said Green is in my mind.

Izzy's face in front of me. Would she say, ‘Do it, Kristen’?

I thought she would.

I was doing it anyway.

Suddenly I sat up straight. How much gas did we have? It was a miracle to see the Mobil sign off to the right. I touched Gram's arm, pointing, and we pulled off the road, waiting for the attendant to fill the tank while I counted out my running money.

‘Good idea,’ Gram said, and I had to smile at her. She would have driven until the tank was empty and might never have remembered.

I was hungry now, hungry. The hot chocolate had not lasted long. And I had not had lunch. I could hurry inside for a bag of potato chips and a chocolate bar.

I glanced out the rearview mirror to see a car pulling up in the back of us at the pump. The man was impatient, tapping his horn for us to get out of the way. There would be no time to buy anything, not even enough time to rummage through the back to find bags of food.

I thought of the hot cocoa woman. She had come up the path tomorrow afternoon to get me, trying to smile, acting as if this would be a lovely afternoon tea at that woman's house-what was her name? Eleanor. When we did not answer the bell, she would go around the back to see if we were in Gram's garden.

But soon enough she had figured out that we were not there. She would stand on tiptoe to look in the window of the garage, and it would be empty. If we were lucky, she would wait awhile. She might think we would be back any minute. But the minutes would stretch out to an hour, and then she would know. She would know. And then she would call the police.

My hands were damp.

Calm down, I made Green is tell me in my mind. You knew all this before you started.

But Gram turned onto the parkway now, and it would not be that long before we crossed the bridge and left Long Island, twenty minutes, and the hot cocoa woman would just be getting ready for bed.

Next to me, in the dim light, I could not see the lines around Gram's eyes, or the ones crisscrossing her forehead. I could pretend we were taking a moonlight ride in the Silver Bullet; pretending Gram was all right and we were not running.

The last time I ran was two weeks after what had happened in Laurel

Highlands. It was September, still hot, with the sun beating down from early morning until dark. It was hard to move, hard to think; everything hurt in my head and my chest. I had had enough of the stucco woman, and I knew she had had enough of me. All I could think about was being somewhere cold, a place where I could scoop up a chunk of snow and crush it against my teeth, a place to take the blame and the pain goes away.

I left at night after the stucco woman had fallen asleep. It took me hours to get off the road, to find a bus. I was gone for days before they caught me.

We would be luckier this time.

There were two letters the next day, one from Poppy and one from Lynnnatta. Kristen managed to pick them up from the mail carrier before he even hit Cross Bay Boulevard. She had been waiting on the corner for more than an hour, watching the street as far down as she could see, wondering if Lynnnatta had gotten the letter she had sent. She had told her about Noah and the cat he was calling Pap.

Kristen yawned, tired from last night. Even after she had tiptoed through the dark kitchen at two or three in the

morning and slipped under the red quilt again, she had not been able to sleep. She had tossed from one side to the other, thinking about the troopship, and Poppy, and what she could do about the lie she had told Tom.

Now she took the letters and went straight to Lynnnatta's house, past the bedroom where Pap slept now, a small orange circle on Eddie's pillow. She climbed the attic stairs and shoved up the window as high as it could go, then took a quick look at the beach. It was still empty at this hour of the morning, litter baskets clean, the sand smooth and even. She had

time, plenty of time. She wanted to stretch out this moment with two letters to read. It would be like sucking on a red LifeSaver until it melted into a thin little circle.

She looked at them both, Lynnnatta's as filthy as the first letter she had sent. But this time it was in ink that was blotted and watery as if drops had been spattered on it.

Her father's letter was much neater, much cleaner, and is beautifully clear writing said, 'Miss Elizabeth Mary Mollahan.'

Kristen slid her fingernail under the flap and slid out the tissue-paper letter.

‘Kristen.' it began. ‘My dearest daughter.’

She closed her eyes and held the letter her father had held in his own hands just a few days ago.

She read the rest of it quickly, so fast the words ran together. He never mentioned that she had not said goodbye. He never said that he minded, or did not mind, only about the war is over, and everything the same again.

I have a picture of you in my head as clear as a photograph to take with me overseas. You are in the boat, and frowning, staring at a skate fish just before you set him free. By the time you read this, Kristen Billy, I will be on my way across the ocean, the faster there, the foster home.

She thought her heart would stop. Her father out there, crossing the Atlantic, was part of a convoy, even on the troopship she and Noah had seen last night.

She could not even think about it. She looked at the end of the letter.

Hug the waves for me, and the beach on 101st Street.

And- then at the very bottom, hug Gram too. She loves you, Kristen. more than you know.

Kristen wiped her eyes. It was a good thing she had Lynnnatta's letter to think about next, and not having to hug Gram.

She looked back at Poppy's letter. At the very bottom he had written:

Do not forget to finish those books, Madeline, and A Tale of Two

Cities, and especially The Three Musketeers.

Kristen frowned. Strange that Poppy had written that. He had read Madeline to her a hundred years ago when she was six. How could he have forgotten? And he did not know she was reading The Three Musketeers. She had just taken it from the library on Thursday.

She put her father's letter down carefully near the chimney and opened Lynnnatta's. It started most strangely. No opening, the way Sister Jillen had taught Kristen in school. No- 'Dear Kristen.' Just please go to my living room and get

Eddie’s picture. Send it right away even if you must ask your grandmother for the money. Tell her I will pay her back when the war is over. I cannot member what Eddie looks like and now he is missing in action, isn’t it strange, on a beach? It was D-Day. The telegram did not come until this morning. He never even got any candy.

Lynnnatta-

Kristen sat there for another minute; then she went down the stairs feeling so dizzy it seemed her feet did not even touch the steps. She went into the Dillons’ living room and reached for

Eddie's picture. Her hands were shaking, and she knocked it off the table, grabbing it before it hit the floor. Nice catch, Kristen.

Eddie would say.

Then she was out the door and down the street. She could not wait to find Gram, to tell her this awful thing that had happened to Eddie Dillon, to ask for wrapping paper and stamps for the picture.

She went down the road and in the back door, but before she could begin,

Gram had started. ‘Change your clothes, Kristen.

and get your hat,’ she said. ‘Mrs. Colgan told me that Eddie

Dillon is missing and-’

‘How does she know?’ Kristen asked.

They could not watch for ships that night. Mr. Colgan had borrowed Gram’s rowboat for night crabbing, and Mr. Meyer was caulking at the bottom of his.

‘Want to go to the movie instead?’ Kristen asked Noah when she caught up with him on the Smiths’ porch.

‘Well…’

‘We won’t stay for the whole thing,’ she told him. ‘We’ll just sneak in and watch until eight-thirty, a little Eyes and Ears of the World News, and…’ She tried to remember the newest movie at Cross Bay. She had seen two minutes of it the other day before the matron had caught her and marched her outside, blinking into the sunshine.

‘How much does it cost?’ he asked.

‘Not a cent. I told you, we’re sneaking in.’ She could see he looked worried. ‘Unless you’re afraid.’

‘I am not afraid of anything.’

‘Well, then.’ Action in the North Atlantic was the name of the movie. It was about the troop ships crossing the ocean, and German submarines following along...

She shivered a little, thinking about those ships. Mrs. Sherman had just pinned up another poster over a pile of

raisin rings. SOMEONE TALKED, it said in big red letters on top, and underneath was a ship sinking so you saw only the bow, and sailors trying to swim away in waves that were high as mountains.

Kristen tried not to think about it. Instead, she walked down the street in front of Tom. They turned in at the alley on one side of the Cross-Bay Theatre. The alley was filled with itchy weeds that smelled. She could see Noah lifting his skinny legs as high as he could, but she just rushed right through the weeds and around to the back.

‘It’s hot as a poker in the balcony,’ she told him. ‘They always leave the door open up there.’

Noah stopped when he saw the fire escape stairs they would have to climb.

‘Don’t be silly,’ she said, knowing what he was thinking.

‘Don’t look down.’

‘It must be two stories,’ he said. ‘You can fall right through those steps, and it looks as if the steps will pull off the side of the wall.’

‘Three stories,’ she said, daring him.

‘I am not afraid,’ he said. ‘I am just telling you.’

She started to climb without answering. She had done this every summer since she was six, up those stairs a thousand times. The stairs were rickety, she had to admit. And the screws holding them to the wall looked rusty as anything. Wouldn’t you think the guy who owned the movie would polish things up occasionally?

She looked back over her shoulder at Tom. He was holding on to the railing for dear life, as Gram would say, stopping each second to close his eyes and take a breath.

‘Race you to the top,’ she said.

He opened his eyes. ‘Sure.’

She grinned. He was a tough kid, that Tom.

The balcony door was opened just wide enough for them to crawl through. She sank on the top step next to the door to watch, with Noah sliding in next to her, breathless. ‘That was so simple,’ he said.

She leaned over. ‘We made it just in time for Bugs Bunny.’

He grinned back. ‘What is up, Doc?’ he said.

She started to laugh.

‘What?’ he asked.

‘It’s your voice. It sounds so… so…’

‘Hungarian,’ he said. ‘It is a Hungarian Bugs Bunny.’

She liked the way he laughed, the way he talked. She kept smiling to herself as they leaned back against the steps to

watch Bugs Bunny chomping on a carrot, falling off a cliff. They had a perfect spot. They had the whole balcony to themselves.

Not one person was up there.

If they had paid, if Poppy had been with her, she would have been able to go downstairs to the candy stand and buy a cup of popcorn, or some peanut chews. If she tried it now-that is, if she had still had her tan purse with money-the matron with her flashlight would be right there to pounce on her.

And- then it was time for the picture. Words... music... a destroyer being blown up in the water. The noise of it was deafening. Explosions were going on all over the place.

Kristen sat there for a while. She watched one of the ships sink and the sailors trying to hold on too little pieces of wood or to swim away, just like the poster in Mrs. Sherman’s bakery.

And- she thought of Poppy. They had heard from him again, but only a postcard. She had missed the mail carrier that day, and the card had slid into the slot in the door, and it had been there all

morning until Gram had spotted it. Never so tired. I never worked so hard, to be ready to go overseas. Thinking of you both in Ridgway makes me happy... makes it all worthwhile. Love, Poppy.

Kristen watched one of the sailors, arms raised, go under the water, and then she did not watch anymore.

Noah was not watching either.

‘Don’t you like the movie?’ she asked.

He shook his head.

‘We could leave-’ she began and broke off. She could see the balcony stairs

and the beam from the matron's flashlight bouncing up toward them.

'I was on a ship like that,' Noah said.

She blinked. Of course. How else had he got here? She had never thought of that. The matron was halfway up the stairs now, looking at them, a frown on her face.

'Tom,' Kristen began.

'Are you here again?' the matron asked. 'I told you last time it's dangerous to climb those steps, and you can't keep coming in here when you don't pay. It was

one thing when you were six years old, but…’

Kristen circled her, with Noah following, and went down the balcony steps to the first floor. They passed the candy counter and the glass stand with the popcorn piled up to the top and went out the door.

Behind them was the sound of bombs, and depth charges exploding, and in the marquee’s light she could see Tom’s face, his blue eyes swimming in tears.

She stood there for a moment, wanting to ask him, wanting to know about the ship, wanting to know what had made him cry.

Then she heard the church chimes.

‘It’s nine o’clock,’ she said. ‘Gram is going to have a fit’

They started to run, crossing the street diagonally, just missing an old Chevy with its headlights blackened, its horn blaring at them. They raced past Mrs. Sherman’s. ‘Same cookies,’ Noah said, breathless, and then around the

corner of the As Good as New Shoppe with the dusty hat and coat, the flute, and the violin.

By the time they reached the back road, Kristen had a pain in her chest and a stitch in her side, and Noah was not crying anymore. They were both laughing, and he grabbed her hand and pulled her along until they reached her back door.

‘Tomorrow,’ Kristen called after him. ‘See you tomorrow.’

‘Yes,’ he said, going down toward the Smiths’.’

It means-’ she began and broke off. How could she explain? Besides, they had to be quiet. She held one finger up to her mouth and reached for the key around her neck. She pulled him inside and shut the door quickly behind them.

‘Why?’ he asked, whispering.

She raised her shoulders, thinking about how to tell him.

‘It’s the war,’ she began. ‘The people are gone now.’

She saw his eyes, blue in the dim light, sad or frightened. ‘Like Budapest,’ he said.

Kristen shook her head a little. ‘Lynnnatta… that’s the girl, said I could. Give me the key. I’m being careful.’

She looked at the winter shutters tight over the windows, and breathed in, trying not to cry over the cat, or her father, or Lynnnatta’s being gone.

‘Hot,’ Noah said.

Kristen shook her head, and then she realized how wet she was, the ends of her hair still dripping.

Noah was frowning. ‘She is too little for food,’ he said slowly. ‘She needs

milk,’ and, even more slowly, ‘She needs her mother.’

Kristen nodded a quick flash in her mind of the stars on her ceiling and her mother. Then she sat back on her heels. Noah was right. The kitten needed milk. She thought about going for it.

She would have to walk to the bayside and sneak past Gram to take a bottle out of the refrigerator.

She could see Gram’s name, fourth on her problem list. It came after First: Lies; Second: Daydreaming; and Third: Friends, need. And now maybe she

would cross the whole thing out and move Gram up to number one. It would serve her right.

Gram would not care even if she knew. She was not talking much to Kristen either, mumbling once, '… terrible that you didn't come back to say goodbye to your father.'

Kristen knew it was terrible, she did not need Gram to tell her that. The last two days she had awoken with a pain in her chest, like a woodpecker banging away at her ribs. If only she had gone home on Saturday morning, or even to the railroad station. Just a few minutes would

have made all the difference. And now she might not see Poppy for years, she might be grown up and he would not even recognize her.

She had written to him, though, along with an ‘I’m sorry’ letter. She had sent it to the address that he had left on her bed. It was a strange address, full of numbers and letters, and did not even tell where he was.

Suddenly she felt cold there in the shade. She moved her head, finding a shaft of sunlight that came through the boardwalk up above. It was warm on her

face. In front of her, a woman went past, humming ‘The Last Time I Saw Paris.’

And Noah was not just looking at the water anymore. He was writing something on that pad. What? She could see a ship way out. He was checking out troop movements. She tried to think about what else the spies checked out when she saw them in the movies. She wondered if she could get up a little closer.

Tom’s head was bent over his paper, and he was writing fast. Kristen crawled around the side of the rusty fence

an inch at a time. If he heard her if he turned around...

She pictured herself as an undercover agent. If Tom, Nazi Spy Tom, turned, he would reach into the bag, pull out his revolver with the silencer. He would shoot her, of course. Never mind. It was for the good of the country. She would win a medal.

She could not see anything on his paper. His shoulder was in the way. She moved over a bit, and another inch or two toward him, and there, she could see the writing on the lined white paper:

Dere Ont Eva and Onkl Emery,

Strange. A secret code. She frowned, suddenly knowing what it was, feeling disappointment. A letter, just a letter, not a spy thing at all… just that he was the worst speller in the world, worse than even she was. She let out her breath.

No. The tan purse. She could run down to Milton at the grocery store. She slapped her pocket. The purse was gone. Of course, it was in the water. All the money she had saved for all the cookies this summer, and the movies, and it was gone. All those months of saving. But Lynnnatta’s letter was still in her pocket.

She could feel it, as wet as the cat. How could she ever read it? She took it out slowly, carefully, and spread it on the counter to dry.

‘I will get milk.’ Noah reached for the back door. ‘Do not worry,’ he said, but it sounded like worry.

He was as careful as she would have been, opening the door less than an inch, peering out, then pushing it all the way. A moment later, the door closed gently, and he was gone.

Where was he going? To Mrs. Meyer's? To Milton's? He had certainly learned to find his way around quickly.

The cat mewed. On the kitchen floor, she was a shadow, so puny she could be only a few weeks old. Poor little thing. Kristen could have cried looking at her. She scooped her up, her face a striped pansy, her ears tiny tags of orange. 'Coming,' Kristen said, 'milk is coming. Don't worry.'

He heard her and turned. Good grief. 'I lost my, um... 'she began, and then she heard the noise.

It was like a mosquito at first, a thin, high sound. It was not a mosquito, though, of course not. The noise grew louder, so loud she could feel the boardwalk tremble with it, could feel the vibration in her chest.

A plane was coming in over the water, so low it was just above the waves, its wings tilting. She could see people standing on the beach watching Mrs. Colgan far down on the beach, looking up, her mouth a perfect round O. And a fat lady with wobbly legs, shading her eyes to see as the plane roared over the beach. It spread a huge, dark shadow, sand

flattening under it and spewing up along the sides.

Kristen backed against the boardwalk steps, her heart thumping in her chest, her head bursting with the sound of it.

The sand was in her mouth and nose, stinging her eyes.

The plane gathered speed, gathered height, was up, over them and past. And then she realized. It was a trainer plane, only a trainer plane from the navy yard.

But Noah could not know that. She could see his face, his blue eyes huge, the pad went out of his hand, blowing across the beach.

Without thinking, she went toward him, spitting out sand, wiping her eyes on her sleeve. The noise of the plane was fading, and she could see Tom's hands were trembling a little.

She reached out and grabbed his arm. 'It's all right,' she told him. Then everything was still, except for the waves rolling in on the shore in front of them.

‘It’s all right,’ she said again. ‘It wasn’t a Nazi. I saw it.’ She made a circle with one finger. ‘The round insignia thing with the star.’

He did not look at her. It almost seemed as if he had not seen her as he kept watching the plane, a speck now in the distance.

She stepped back. She could still feel her heart pounding.

‘It was a trainer plane.’ She pointed across the shoreline toward Coney Island. ‘From the naval base.’

He was not listening. He followed his paper across the beach, and suddenly she remembered he had caught her spying on him again. Feeling her face redden, knowing she would not go near him for the rest of the summer, she went up the boardwalk steps and started for home.

She wandered down the hall with the cat in her arms, running her hand over her back, feeling the knobs of her bony spine. The first door was to Eddie’s bedroom. She pushed it open with one finger. It was a little lighter in there, the shutters not as tight against the windows.

She could see Gram's hand, soft and plump on the pillows. Gram's wedding ring was a silver sliver that had made a deep ridge on her finger. 'I was skinny until you started school,' she had told Kristen once, laughing. 'Then I started to eat and found out how tasty food was.'

Kristen could not picture it, could not picture Gram skinny, and swimming across Jamaica Bay. Her father had told her Gram had done that. 'I watched her when I was small,' he had said. 'She had a braid to her waist, and she was a seal in the water.'

Gram was sitting on the couch in the living room when Kristen came in. She was listening to Portia Faces Life. Kristen liked to listen to Portia too.

She and Lynnnatta had sent away for Portia's picture. They had written a letter straight to WEAF radio station just before Lynnnatta had left. Lynnnatta said stars like Portia always had films of themselves lying around.

Right now, on the radio, Portia's husband, Walter, was a prisoner of war in Germany, and he had just thought of an escape plan. He was going to hide in a small boat. Then when an American ship

passed, he would signal it with a flashlight and row out to freedom.

Kristen sank on one end of the couch, as far away from Gram as she could get, to listen.

Gram still had the braid, but now it was twisted around in the back of her head in a bun. At night, she would take out the bobby pins, run her fingers through her hair, and brush it.

Gram’s hand was moving. Kristen watched out of the corner of her eye as the plump fingers walked across the

pillows, and Gram's arm came up around her.

Kristen was about to shrug her arm away, about to get up, but it felt so good to be sitting there in that circle that she moved closer. A moment later, she was crying, and she did not even try to stop.

'I know,' Gram said.

Kristen shook her head. 'No, you don't.'

Gram touched her sleeve, making tiny pleats in the cotton with her fingers.

‘We were going to go fishing,’ Kristen said, ‘and to the movies. We were going to do everything.’

‘Your father said the same thing,’ Gram said.

Kristen looked up. ‘Really?’

Gram nodded. ‘Your eyes will be red.’

She shook her head. ‘I don’t care.’

‘Yes, you will,’ Gram said. ‘We’re going out to dinner.’

‘Trixie’s Restaurant?’

‘Of course not. There’s a war on and not a penny to spare for such foolish-’ Gram broke off. ‘We’re going to the Smiths’.’ Kristen sat up straight. She could feel her mouth suddenly go dry. ‘I’m not-’

‘Mr. Meyer said you did a magnificent job on his headlight.’

‘I don’t-’

‘There’s a surprise for you, Mrs. Meyer said.’

Kristen bit her lip. Some surprise. As if she could not guess. Tom. Kristen moved back to the end of the couch. She

was not going to the Smiths' house, not in a million squillion years.

'I'm not... 'Kristen began again and stopped. She always loved to go to the Smiths for dinner. Sometimes there was a flounder Mr. Meyer had caught that morning, with corn on the cob, and a cake with jelly icing on top. How could she say she did not want to go, that she knew about Tom? And worse, that he knew about her. Gram would not take no for an answer. Never.

Gram was up from the couch now. 'We'll have to see what happens to

Walter tomorrow,' she said. 'They're certainly stretching this out.'

Kristen followed her into the bathroom and watched as Gram opened her compact and took out her powder puff.

Kristen leaned forward to look in the mirror. Her eyes were red, and so was her nose.

'Here.' Gram ran a washcloth under the tap. 'Nice and cool.' She held it up to Kristen's eyes. 'Better in a minute, wait and see.'

Gram was right. Kristen held her head back and felt the coolness of the cloth on her eyes and her cheeks. In the back of her, she could hear the news. An American general had told reporters he needed only three hours of mild weather and the army could break out of Normandy and start across France.

Strange, Kristen thought, in France, the weather was gray and cloudy, and the Americans were caught on a beach that was wet and cold. Here in Ridgway. It was beautiful.

She checked the mirror again. No one would guess she had been crying.

Gram took her powder puff and waved it over Kristen's nose. 'I hear the church bells. We are supposed to be there at six. Come on.'

Kristen walked out behind her, taking the smallest steps she could. She dreaded having to meet Tom, meet him at last. She would not say a word to him. She would talk to Mr. and Mrs. Meyer and not even look at him.

Mrs. Meyer was waiting at the door, excited, smiling.

'Have I got a surprise for you,' she said.

And behind her was Tom. Tom, with that mop of dark hair and blue eyes. She took a quick look at him. He was looking at her too. His mouth opened. ‘You are Kristen?’

‘Of course, she’s Kristen.’ Mrs. Meyer said.

Kristen raised one eyebrow and put on her ‘Too bad for you, Sister Jillen’ face. Usually, she was good at that, but halfway into the face, her eyes slid away because for the quickest second it looked as if Noah was going to laugh.

When she looked back, he was tapping his lip, looking at her, his eyebrows raised. What was that all about? she wondered. Noah was crazy.

But then Mr. Meyer was leading them to the table, his hand on Kristen's back, smiling. 'Sit here next to me,' he told Gram. 'And Kristen. my love, across from Tom, my nephew. Tom's here from my brother Emery's in Canada to spend the summer.' 'From Hungary,' Mrs. Meyer said at the same time.

'To be safe from the war.'

Noah looked up. He spoke to Gram, though, not even glancing at Kristen. ‘From Budapest, two years ago.’ The words sounded different on his tongue, soft, almost musical.

Mrs. Meyer shook her head. ‘It was a long trip for Tom. Through Austria and Switzerland, across the mountains to France, then a ship…’ She stopped for a breath.

‘With Christy,’ Noah said.

Mrs. Meyer’s face suddenly looked different, older, sad. ‘His eight-

year-old sister was sick,' she told them. 'She's caught in France.'

Noah made a sound, said something.

Kristen took a quick look, but he was smearing margarine over a slice of bread, looking down. And then Mr. Meyer began to talk quickly, and so did Gram, and Kristen bent over her plate to bone the fish and begin on the corn. She was starving.

Noah must have been starving too. He bent over his plate; his hand made

a fist around his fork. He ate fast, taking huge bites, shoveling it in.

Gram would have had a fit if she had done that.

He raised his head, and immediately she looked past him, toward the lemon cake on the counter, and beyond to the window. Outside, pairs of socks were hanging on the porch railing.

The water was flat and slick with the sun slanting over it.

‘Isn’t this perfect,’ Mrs. Meyer said. ‘Just as Lynnnatta leaves, Noah

comes. You'll have someone to fish with all summer, Kristen.'

Gram was staring at her. Kristen could feel her eyes. Gram thought she knew what Kristen was thinking, thought Kristen would not go to the beach with any boy, fish with him, go to the Cross-Bay Theatre...

What Gram did not know was that it was the other way around.

'Yes,' said Gram. 'It's perfect. Isn't it, Kristen?'

She did not look at Gram. She took a chunk of corn off the cob, with a

bite as big as Tom's. She certainly could not answer them with her mouth full.

Noah had finished his fish and corn and was into the peas now. Mounds of peas were falling off the edge of his fork. And suddenly he looked up and saw her watching him. He was laughing, bringing his hand up to his mouth. And just as suddenly, she knew what he was doing. He was reminding her of the lipstick, Gertz Department Store, FREE TAKE ONE. Good grief.

It was a good thing Mrs. Meyer was talking, otherwise, Kristen might just have jumped up to race out of there and

never come back. But what was Mrs. Meyer saying? ‘Noah doesn’t know the ocean. He doesn’t know how to swim.’

‘And Kristen. ‘Mr. Meyer said, ‘swims like a mermaid.’

‘She’ll teach you, Tom,’ Mrs. Meyer said. ‘No one swims the way Kristen does.’

Teach him to swim-she could not believe it.

‘Except her grandmother,’ said Mr. Meyer.

Gram laughed. ‘I haven’t put my foot in the water since I taught Kristen to swim.’

Kristen remembered that, remembered paddling around in the water, listening as Gram held her feet lightly, pointing her big toes toward each other, angling her hands so the sides of her index fingers slid into the water first. ‘Everything makes a difference,’ Gram had said.

And on Friday night, they had shown her father. No life vest anymore, and by that time Kristen could dive. She went off the side of the porch, her toes

digging into the railing for an instant, then pushing up, arms stretched, head down. She slid underneath smoothly with the sound of the water in her ears, the taste of it on her tongue, up then, and swimming in front of the houses easily, as easily as she could walk.

Moments later, she had climbed back up. Her father had wrapped her in a huge towel, hugging her and telling her how proud her mother would have been.

And now Gram was telling the Smiths about Poppy. ‘I hope he’s still at Fort Dix,’ she said. In the back of them, the teakettle was whistling. Gram’s face

was sad. ‘He’ll go to Europe soon, any day.

He has gone already. I hope it isn’t in Germany.’

Kristen stuffed her mouth with bread. She wanted to stuff her ears too. She did not want Gram to talk about it. She did not want to think about it.

Then Mrs. Meyer passed them slices of lemon cake, apologizing because it was made with margarine and not butter, and Noah began to eat again, two pieces, and then a third. He did not look at Kristen again, and she sat there

thinking about him laughing at her, and wondering about his sister, Christy, and trying to pretend she did not notice he was there until they were finished, and it was time to go home.

Thursday. She had been ducking away from Noah for a week. It was just the opposite now. Everywhere she went, she saw Tom. Ahead of her, behind her, even coming out of Sherman's Bakery.

But right now, she had other things to think about. A letter from her father. They had received only a quick postcard: Arrived safely. Miss you terribly. We will be fishing this time next

year. Letter follows. Best love, Poppy. Today there would be a real letter. She could see it in her mind, tissue-thin with a red, white, and blue border, the same as the letters Eddie Dillon sent home.

'If you could stop dreaming and finish your breakfast,' Gram said.

Kristen picked up her spoon. She could see something else too. Gram would be leaning over her shoulder, reading the letter, her lips moving slightly, reading even faster than she could.

Kristen ate her cereal without looking once into the bowl. Bits of cream

were floating around in the milk, white things looking like tiny fish. She could almost feel them on her teeth.

She shuddered. The white things were floating around inside her now. She went out to the porch and leaned on the screen. The water was swollen this morning, the tide high.

She knew exactly what she would do. She would hang around on Cross Bay Boulevard, stop at Sherman's Bakery for a roll or a cookie. She would grab the mail carrier before he even got around to her grandmother on the bayside.

If only he would give her the letter.

She reached under her bed for her pad and pencil and the tan purse with the money she had saved all winter.

‘Going to Sherman’s,’ she told Gram’s back at the kitchen sink.

Gram made a tiny breathing sound, a ‘no’ sound, but before she could say she shouldn’t waste her money on cookies that tasted like cardboard, Kristen began, ‘My money. My

Christmas, snow-shoveling, allowance-saving money.’

Gram’s voice rose. ‘Then don’t forget sunburn lotion.

You’ll have blisters on your nose.’

Kristen did not wait to hear the rest. She was out the door and up the road. Already it was hot, the tar shimmering in the haze, the sound of the cicadas beginning. ‘Listen,’ Poppy would say, ‘it’s the sound of summer.’

She wondered when she would see him again. The days stretched out in front of her like long gray sheets on a washing line.

Summer will be over and fall...

Kristen passed the As Good as New Shoppe on the corner. Everything in the window was just the same, the old coat and dusty straw hat, certainly not looking new, the flute and violin in back, and the stuffed dog that looked as if it would fall over any second.

Sherman's Bakery was at the near end of Cross Bay Boulevard. It was dim and dusty, and Kristen could see through the screen that Mrs. Sherman had not gotten around to baking yet. The trays were almost empty. A strawberry-pink birthday cake stood on one shelf and a plate of pale sugar cookies on another.

The cookies had jelly in the middle, but the jelly would be hard by now, the juice drained out overnight.

Kristen stood there, hand on the screen door, squinting in the sun. The mail carrier was halfway up the next block. She could see him plodding along across the street.

She took a step, but Mrs. Sherman, hands floury, came out from the back and spotted her. ‘Kristen.’ she said. ‘My first customer today.’

Kristen pulled open the door and went inside, glancing up at the poster

over the glass counter: LOOSE LIPS SINK SHIPS. ‘Not much left,’ Mrs. Sherman said. ‘Sticky buns later but try those jelly cookies for now.’

Kristen looked down at the cookies. Up close they looked worse, shrunk, and dry. She wondered which way the mail carrier was going. Toward the bay? Back along the boulevard?

‘Can’t get much better with the war on, you know,’ Mrs. Sherman began, leaning against the counter.

Kristen nodded. If the mail carrier went toward the bay, he would

turn before the bakery. She would miss him.

‘I’ll take a cookie,’ Kristen said. ‘Sure.’

‘The egg man went into the service,’ Mrs. Sherman said.

‘I don’t know how I’m going to get eggs now, or cheese.’

‘My grandmother said I have to be right home. I have to stop her medicine.’

‘Sick? Your grandmother’s sick?’

The next thing she knew, Mrs. Sherman would be on her way to Grams with her dried-up cookies. ‘Uh… no. It is my aunt

Celia. In Europe.’

Mrs. Sherman shook her head, clucking a little. ‘What’s the matter?’

She would never get out of there. She took a step back, trying to think. She remembered the news a while back: battles in Russia, with snow and biting cold. ‘Frostbite,’ she said.

Mrs. Sherman raised one eyebrow. ‘In July?’

Kristen shook her head. ‘I don’t know. I really-’

Mrs. Sherman sighed. ‘It’s the war. No one knows what’s going on.’ She reached for a bag. ‘Two cookies. Two for the price of one.’

‘Thanks,’ Kristen said. If she ran, she could cut the mail carrier off. She counted pennies out on the counter, reached for the bag, then banged out the screen door.

He was there, crossing the street, still on the boulevard. A miracle.

‘Hey,’ she called. ‘Wait up.’

He did not turn around. He stopped to stuff a paper into the slot at the restaurant, then went next door to the dry cleaner. By the time she caught up with him, she could feel perspiration streaking down her back.

‘I need my mail,’ she told his sack, not looking at his face.

He would never even give her the movie advertisement. He shook his head. ‘I’ve told you. I must deliver it to your grandmother’s house. Cannot be dropping her mail all over the place. She’d carry on and-’

‘My mail,’ Kristen said. ‘My mail.’

Inside the sack was her letter, written in her father’s handwriting. It would start with ‘Sweetheart,’ or ‘Dear Kristen Billy.’

‘My father,’ she said in a voice she could hardly hear herself, ‘is in the service. The Secret Service.’ She stopped, trying to think about how to convince him. ‘He told me to be sure to get the mail first. He-’

The mail carrier looked up. ‘Jerry went overseas?’

The letter was there, so close she could reach out and take it. She hated the mail carrier.

‘You know you’re not supposed to ask,’ she said. ‘You saw the poster in Mrs. Sherman’s, ‘Loose Lips Sink Ships.’ Spies could be walking up and down Cross Bay Boulevard, and my father, who’s on a ship right now…’

She could feel her lips trembling even though she did not know if her father was on a ship, or still in New Jersey at Fort Dix, perfectly safe.

The mail carrier shifted the leather strap on his shoulder.

‘Don’t cry, Kristen. Let me look. Let me just see…’

She stood there waiting as he went through dozens of envelopes, it seemed like stacks of papers. He kept shaking his head.

Then, at last, he plucked a letter out of the sack.

She breathed in and could feel the tears now.

‘It’s not from your father,’ he said.

Then she could see it too. A small white envelope, filthy, MISS Kristen MOLLAHAN, in pencil.

Lynnnatta. Only Lynnnatta.

‘Listen, Kristen.’ He spoke. ‘There’ll be a letter tomorrow.

Betcha. You’ll come right down here to Cross Bay…’

She stared at the sidewalk, at a crack running along with it, a hill of ants bustling. ‘He’s terribly busy,’ she said.

‘I know,’ he said. ‘He’s a great guy.’

Kristen took the letter from him, dug it into her shorts pocket. ‘I’ll see you tomorrow, then,’ she said.

‘You can count on it.’

She headed for the fishing dock, looking back once to wave to him. It was a hot walk along Cross Bay Boulevard, but worth it. The fishing boats would be long gone now on a weekday, out since early this morning. She would have the wharf to herself, with only a fisher or two trying for fluke.

She ran the last bit, seeing the weathered dock in front of her, the flag

flapping wildly on the pole, and best of all, no one there, not a soul. She took a deep breath, smelling the sea, and kerosene from the boats, and sat on a bench halfway down to read Lynnnatta's letter. But before she even got to take it out of her pocket, she could see someone on the beach path. No, two people. Her luck.

She shaded her eyes. One was coming on a bicycle, wobbling along, a basket in front, and the other, an effective way in the back of him, seemed to be... She sat up straighter. Yes, it was Noah running down the road after him. He

stopped once, and darted into the reeds, as the bicycle rider looked over his shoulder. What was Noah up to, anyway?

The rider slowed as he neared the dock. It was a fisher who would talk and talk, and she would never get one minute's peace when the person she wanted to talk to was Tom.

She slid off the bench, leaning against the side. If he had not seen her, he would have gone all the way to the far end on that bicycle and passed her right by.

He did not, though. She could hear him swinging off the bike, the sound of metal as he rested it against a bench farther down, a splash as he tossed something into the water, and as she peered around the side of the bench, he was on his way again, and Noah was running toward her, waving his arms, shouting.

Kristen gathered herself to her feet, looking first at Tom, whose feet were pounding along the wooden pier, and then at the back of the man on the bicycle. No, it was a boy, a teenager. His head was down, bent over the handlebars, his feet

pedaling faster, picking up speed as he disappeared into one of the narrow lanes that snaked through the reeds.

Noah was in front of her now, almost babbling as he pointed down into the pure green water. She took a step toward the edge, looking down too. She saw threads of seagrass floating under the surface, and then the bulging bag, out of sight, sank to the bottom.

'It is a cot,' Noah said. 'A cot.'

She shook her head. 'It's too small for a…' She drew in her breath. A cat. He meant a cat. She was in the water

in an instant, rolling over the side instead of diving, not sure of the depth. It was over her head, much deeper than she would have guessed, seven or eight feet. The water bubbled above her, sunlit at first, and then darker. She turned and kicked with her feet, her arms out, reaching, reaching...

And felt the edge of it, the paper bag shredding away in her fingers. Then, a miracle, the kitten was in her hands.

She kicked up with it and broke the surface. It was still, unmoving, a sodden reddish mass, as Tom, hanging half off the pier, took it from her.

She swam around to the steps the fisher used to clean their catch and pulled herself up.

Noah was standing in the middle of the dock now, wrapping the kitten on the edge of his shirt. She moved toward him, her clothes heavy and dripping, her sneakers filled with so much water it was hard to move. ‘Don’t let her lie still,’ she said.

‘Keep her moving.’

When she reached him, she grabbed his wrist, shaking his hands, and the cat with them. ‘More,’ she told him.

She dug the cat out of the end of his shirt and kneaded the fur, holding her head down, until at least she coughed and sneezed.

'She is alive,' Noah said. They looked at each other, smiling. How blue his eyes are, she thought, and when he smiled, she liked his face. He looked like another person, like a friend.

But he smiled for only a moment. He took the cat from her, rubbing her fur with his shirt, drying it, and looking around. 'That boy,' he said. 'I saw him put the cat in the bag-' He broke off. 'I have

to make her warm,' he said. 'I have to dry her.'

She nodded. Gram would never let her keep a cat, and Mrs. Meyer had never had a pet that she knew about. If only Mrs. Dillon were still there.

Lynnnatta's house, she thought. 'I know,' she told Tom.

'I'll show you.'

It took ten minutes to get back to Lynnnatta's house. They walked slowly, stopping every few minutes to make sure the cat was breathing. She was curled into a ball, still damp, under Tom's shirt.

Kristen led the way around the back. ‘I know it looks as if no one lives here,’ she said, ‘but I have the key, and it isn’t trespassing.’

‘Trespassing?’ He said it after her as if the word had a million s’s. ‘Funny word.’

She remembered when they were about seven, she and Lynnnatta had sneaked in to steal enough money for a sticky bun each at Mrs. Sherman’s. Eddie had caught them, and Lynnnatta, fresh as paint Gram would say, told him what they were doing. He had dug into his pocket

for a dime and tossed it toward Kristen in a silvery arc.

She had reached out, and somehow it had landed in her outstretched hands. She remembered Eddie smiling, his teeth over his bottom lip, his eyes crinkling. ‘Nice catch.’

It was hot in the bedroom, stifling. She had to get out of there. She went back into the kitchen, feeling the flutter of the kitten’s heartbeat.

Lynnnatta’s letter. She went over to the counter and angled it, so a shaft of light ran across the envelope from end to

end. She ran her finger lightly over the mess of Lynnnatta's handwriting, the return address, DETROIT, MICHIGAN. And even though it had been in the water, Kristen could still see a smear of chocolate on the flap. One more candy bar that would never get to Eddie in Europe.

She sank to the floor with the letter, the kitten in her lap. The envelope opened easily, and the letter came out, damp but still readable.

Dear Kristen.

There is no ocean here at Willow Run, no paint on the houses. They go together in a row, and you can hear people talking and fighting and even going to the bathroom. The houses were just slapped up because thousands of people have come here to make the bombers. My father took me in to see. The factory is a mile long. Everyone just makes one little piece that fits together until the B-24 is finished. My father says they build a bomber every 103 minutes (about 1 hour 43 minutes). I hate the whole thing. How is the attic? Did you find the red candy?

Lynnnatta

Kristen shifted to the floor, peeling her sweaty legs off the linoleum, thinking about Lynnnatta so far away. Lynnnatta without an ocean, without Ridgway. She wondered what Lynnnatta would think about Tom.

She went into the house, thinking about tomorrow, thinking about asking him all the things she wanted to know.

Gram was in the kitchen making iced tea, and she poured some for Kristen. ‘I was just getting a little worried,’ she said.

‘I was with Tom,’ Kristen said.

Gram nodded at her. ‘Good. I’m glad.’

Kristen leaned over the kitten. ‘Noah likes cats,’ she said.

‘That’s something.’

Then he was back, a milk bottle in his hands, enough milk for ten cats the size of this one.

‘Now.’ Kristen put the cat back on the counter and took the bottle from Tom. She ran her finger under the paper top, popping it up. She tried not to look at the yellow cream just underneath. She

would gag if she saw it. She had to dig it out, though.

It might be too thick for the kitten to swallow.

She opened a kitchen drawer, found a spoon, and skimmed off the cream, swallowing hard. She dropped it, spoon, and all, into the sink.

‘What are you doing?’ He took the spoon and sucked the cream that was left.

She began to gag.

‘What is the matter?’ He turned the spoon over and ran his tongue over the back.

‘Nothing.’ She handed him the bottle and let him take the last of the cream. A little stayed on his lower lip, a small yellow fish.

She was going to vomit right now. ‘Wipe your mouth,’ she told him. She breathed in as he ran the back of his arm over his face, trying to think about chocolate, red LifeSavers, and cookies with the jelly in the middle.

‘My sister, Christy, loves cream,’ he said.

Kristen looked up, but the cat was standing on the countertop, one paw out, ready to sail into the air.

'Watch out,' she said, and he dived for the kitten and caught her. Then Kristen rummaged around for a small round bowl and poured in some of the milk.

For a moment, the kitten did not seem to notice the bowl in front of her. Then, at last, she turned her head and began to lap at it with her rough little tongue. They watched her until she sat back, and her blue-green eyes began to

close, and they could hear her begin to purr.

‘What are we going to do with her?’ Kristen asked. ‘I don’t think Gram…’

Noah was nodding, looking down at the cat. ‘Could we keep her here?’

Kristen had thought of that too. Mrs. Dillon loved cats.

She would hate it that someone had tried to drown a kitten.

‘I have the key,’ she said to herself.

‘If you will lend it to me,’ he said, ‘I will feed the cat myself. You do not have to bother. I will be incredibly careful.’

‘There’s a place in the back,’ she said, ‘under the edge of the steps. The Dillons left their key there sometimes. I guess…’ She felt so disappointed, she could hardly finish. He did not want to be friends. He could have said We can feed her together, or even We can take turns.

Noah patted the cat’s head gently, then took a towel that was still looped over a hook. He made it into a little bed in the corner. There were

newspapers there too, and stored them into strips for the cat's litter, as Kristen itched.

She wanted to say, 'It's my cat too.' She wanted to say, 'I was the one who saved her.' She did not, though.

When Noah was finished, she opened the door and, knowing he was watching, went to the back to wedge the key behind the rock.

She started for home without saying goodbye. It was lunchtime anyway. Never mind that Noah did not want to be friends. After lunch, she would take her

library book, The Three Musketeers, out in the boat with a pillow... the musketeers, who were in France like Tom's sister. Yes, that is what she would do. Too bad about being friends. She had read for the rest of the afternoon.

The church bells were ringing. Six o'clock on a Wednesday night, at the end of July. Everyone was gathering up pails and wet towels and pulling umbrellas across the beach. She could not wait until the last family dragged itself off the boardwalk toward the Cross-Bay buses. She could not wait until the beach belonged to her.

Gram had packed her supper, Spam doing well with a tomato from Mrs. Colgan's Victory Garden, three or four celery sticks, and a bottle of orange juice.

Kristen sat as close to the water as she could get without getting soaked. The tide was high. The waves washed in, then sucked everything back out, shells, and sand, and bits of seaweed. She thought about listening to Portia Faces Life with Gram this afternoon. Walter was in a rowboat now, waiting to find an American ship to pick him up. Kristen looked out at the water, thinking about Poppy. He would be on a ship one of these

days, even today, crossing the Atlantic, passing Ridgway. She shaded her eyes, watching a lone swimmer surf.

She sat up straight. Who was that?

Tom: he was not out far. He was swimming along in a line next to the beach.

He was not swimming, though. He pulled himself to his feet, then threw himself down to take a couple of strokes before disappearing under the water. A moment later he is up, sputtering, to start the whole thing over. If a lifeguard had

been on the beach, he would have been out after Noah in two seconds.

Kristen stood up. Noah was trying to teach himself how to swim.

He was not paying one bit of attention to the water. He was not trying to be part of it, to float along with it. He was fighting it, arms slapping, head sticking up like a tennis ball.

She would not be able to eat her Spam in peace; she would have to watch him every minute.

Noah was going to kill himself.

Yes, there it was, a giant of a wave. She could see it swelling, way out but moving toward him, picking up speed.

She looked toward Tom. Under. Tennis ball head shooting up. An arm out over his head, fingers wide apart.

She stood up, trying to see how much time he had. She cupped her hands over her mouth, shouting. He could not hear her, could not see her.

She took a step toward him. Then she was running, throwing herself into the icy coldness, slicing into the water, swimming diagonally.

Of course, she was too late. The wave curled up high, and she was in the wrong position, just where it arched. It smashed into her, dragging her down, scraping her along the sand. She could not get her breath. The water was in her mouth, her throat, her nose.

And then she was out of it, coughing up water, arms and legs scratched, lying on foamy sand.

The last time she had done that she was six years old. Poppy had caught her up in his arms and carried her back to the blanket. He had fed her tiny squares of egg salad crunchy with celery.

She looked up to see her feet. Skinny Noah feet. Bony Noah's legs with black-and-blue marks and grains of sand.

She had forgotten all about him.

She leaned on her hands to push herself up, then scrambled to her feet.

Noah reached out. 'I thought you were such a good swimmer,' he said.

As soon as she stopped coughing, she was going to drown him herself. She was going to take him by his skinny neck and throw him right back.

She went back to the blanket and sat on the edge, wiping her face with her

hands. Her nose and throat burned. She remembered the bottle of orange juice and ached for it. She knew he had followed her to the blanket, but she did not look up.

She wanted to say she could swim better than anyone she knew. Hadn't she saved the cat? But she wanted to say more, that the ocean belonged to her, that all winter at home in St. Paul's she thought about it moving and rolling and waiting for her to come back.

'How is the cat?' she said, knowing very well how the cat was. She had spied on Noah going in and out of use

for the last few days. She had let herself in when he was gone. The cat had fluffed up, soft orange and white. He kept her bed and litter box clean, and the kitchen too.

‘The cat is good,’ he said. He was sitting on the other end of the blanket now, dripping. She did not know how he had been there. He pointed. ‘Do you see?’

The end of the jetty, a gray triangular rock. She nodded.

‘Yes.’

‘If you drew a line straight out, all the way…’

‘Europe,’ she said.

He nodded. ‘Europe.’

‘Want some juice?’ she asked, not looking at him.

He shook his head.

She took a deep swallow of the juice, feeling it soothe her throat, watching a curl of smoke out on the horizon.

‘A ship,’ Noah said, ‘going to Europe.’

‘No.’ She shaded her eyes. ‘It’s a cutter. Coast Guard, patrolling.’ It felt

good to let him know she knew something, knew more than he did.

She took another sip from the bottle.

‘My aunt said you can see the ships from here.’

‘They form a convoy way out,’ she said and pointed. ‘But some of them come from Brooklyn. The destroyers, the carriers, sometimes the tankers. You can see them at night if you watch long enough.’

‘Going to Europe,’ Noah said.

She nodded. ‘Going to win the war for us, going to blast the Nazis right out of the water.’

‘And your father is going…’

Later, when she thought about it, she could not imagine saying what she had, it was just that she had been thinking of Portia Faces Life, and Poppy crossing out there in front of her, and Noah saying, ‘I thought you were such a good swimmer.’

‘I’m going too,’ was what she said. ‘At night. I am going to row right out and swim the last bit. I’ll have a rubber

bag with dry clothes.' It sounded wonderful, and she could see he was listening. He was not thinking of her as a silly kid, wearing Gertz lipstick, spying around. 'I'm going to take a ship to my father, no one will stop to take me back to Brooklyn, there's a war on, you know...' Talking and talking, making up lies as she went along, and Tom, leaning forward...

'You could do that?' he asked.

'Of course.' She stared at the cutter angling its way west toward Brooklyn until all she could see was a curl of smoke on the horizon. And then, just for a moment, it almost seemed possible.

She could see herself reaching the troopship, climbing aboard, and sailing to Europe to find Poppy.

‘And you can see those ships at night?’ He took a breath. ‘Would you take me out to see them? Would you take me out tonight?’

She put the empty bottle back in her bag and started to roll up her towel. ‘All right,’ she said, not looking at him.

He stood up. ‘I am going to the house. I will feed my cat.

You will come to my porch at eleven?’

He started across the sand, not waiting for an answer.

She sat there a minute longer, her heart pounding, thinking that this was truly the worst lie she had ever told.

Kristen went into her bedroom with a glass of lukewarm iced tea and a sprig of mint from Mrs. Colgan’s Victory Garden.

She bent over to run her fingers across her mother’s stars pasted in a neat row, still thinking about tomorrow.

Films of Kristen Deniel

The Old Man framed this picture and hung it over the bed in my French Blue room in our winter house in Hancock. The mirror on the opposite wall reflects the picture so it is the first thing I see when I open my eyes in the morning … that and my tree figure from Gram.

The tree figure wears the crystal beads Izzy gave me.

‘They're too small for you now, Kristen,’ Izzy said as she looped them carefully over the sea-grass head. ‘They're from my sixth birthday. But I always wanted my oldest daughter to have them.’

I tried to match the picture to the Wone in my backpack, but I could not do it exactly. First, there is a flag in the background of this one because it is Memorial Day, the day we open the house in Laurel Highlands for the summer each year. It is early in the morning, and we are standing on the porch steps with the sun sending beams of light across the river in front of us.

But there are five of us in the picture instead of four. The Old Man, looking a little grim: He's just discovered that Green is left his bedroom window open, so the snow drifted in all winter,

ruining the wall, and buckling parts of the wood floor.

Green tries to look serious, but you can see the laughter in his eyes. ‘Holly will paint it up,’ he said, needling the Old Man. ‘She'll paint it green. That's her favorite color.’

They still argue, sometimes so loudly I put my hands over my ears. When they see me, they smile? ‘It's all her fault,’ Green says, and the Old Man leans over to pat my shoulder.

In the picture, Izzy stands in the center, a little taller than the Old Man.

She is wearing a loose shirt in that blue I love. ‘Are you happy?’ she asked me as I sketched us all later that day. ‘Be happy, Kristen, because I am. I've never been happier.’

I did not answer. Instead, I drew smiles on both our faces. I am the fourth one in the picture smiling just a bit. I know I am thinking of Gram, thinking of running here with her a year and a half ago. If I had not done that, I would not have had this picture, I would not have had any of it. I would still be running.

Every month we go to Long Island to see her in her kitchen with

Henry, and the pelican, and the tree figures she still carves, while Beatrice patters around fixing tea for all of us.

Gram does not remember exactly who I am anymore. She loves me, though, I know that, and always reaches up to touch my cheek. Sometimes I wear her brown hat with a veil, and then I see the recognition in her eyes. ‘Kristen,’ she says. ‘You saved my life.’ She does not know why, but still, she says it, and I always tell her it was the other way around.

And Henry? Ancient, but still feisty. ‘That cat's as tough as you are,’ Green says to me.

Henry looks at me, and it is as if he wins before he closes both eyes above a wide yawn. We speak the same language, that cat and me.

I have a new last name now. It is Regan. I love the sound of it. I have not forgotten Kristen Copses, who wanted and wished, fresh as paint, a mountain of trouble, so I sign my drawings using the three names. They all belong to me. Emmy and the hot cocoa woman both like the idea of that. They show up regularly

to say hello, nodding and smiling as if they were the ones who changed my whole life. I do not say anything. I know they are relieved to have me out of their hands and settled. And I have to say I cannot blame them for that. I have to say, too, that I even smile back at them occasionally.

But the picture, and why it does not match the first one, the W picture: It is because I am holding my sister, Christina, six weeks old, in my arms.

She looks quiet in the picture, contented, sucking on her thumb. But she is not always like that. And when she

cries, we run to her from wherever we are. We stand over her bassinet smiling at her, cooing. And Izzy always puts her arms around me. ‘You brought us luck,’ she says.

So, there are five of us now: a mother, a father, a brother, and two sisters.

A family.

Kristen - bedroom was at the top of the stairs, the only one on the second floor. ‘The top of the house,’ Gram always told her, ‘The top of the world.’

Kristen sank back on her heels to look around at the blue walls and ceiling, and the gold stars passed on here and there. Then she stretched up again, working with Poppy's paint scraper, to peel off a star that was beyond her reach.

She was hot and sticky, the temperature at least ninety degrees, and Gram, who did not have one bit of patience, was calling from the kitchen for the tenth time.

'Your father will be home in just a few minutes, and the table isn't set.'

As if Kristen did not know it was dinnertime. Even Mrs. Harry halfway down 17th Street would be able to smell that cabbage cooking. ‘I thought you wanted me to finish packing,’ Kristen called back as loudly as she could, to drown out the radio in the kitchen.

She could hardly breathe in that bedroom, Kristen thought, glancing around again; she could hardly walk. Things were pulled out all over the floor, waiting to be stuffed into her suitcase: books, papers with stories she had written, bathing suits, and heaps of clothes Gram had put on the bed.

She had even found an old silver mirror of her mother's she had hidden away in the back of the closet last winter. She was going to put it carefully on top of the suitcase in a nest of pajamas. It would be a miracle if she ever got that far, though, if everything got itself sorted out, and packed, and if they made it to the house in Ridgway before her birthday on Monday.

'Ridgway.' She said it aloud, loving the sound of it on her tongue. Ridgway and the ocean were waiting for her. The summer without homework... to author stories for herself and not Sister

Jillen. The summer without a piano to practice every afternoon.

Days and days to sneak into the movies with her best friend, Lynnnatta.

Gram was at the bottom of the stairs now, the six o'clock news blaring from the radio behind her. War news, about the end of the war. The invasion of France by the Allies a couple of weeks ago. That was all nobody talked about. No, not quite. Sister Jillen was much more interested in whether the class had rosaries and clean handkerchiefs in their pockets than in who was going to win the war.

Too bad about Sister Jillen. Kristen would be out of St. Paul's in four days, and Sister Jillen would still be stuck there in St.

Pascal's thinking about everyone's clean handkerchiefs.

'Kristen? You're not packed yet?' Gram called. 'I thought you'd finished an hour ago. And remember we don't have that much room in the car.'

'Almost finished,' Kristen said, and 'almost started,' under her breath. And there, with another slide of the paint scraper, the star came bizarre in one

piece, drifting into her outstretched palm. It was perfect, the points still as sharp as when they were new. The star she had scraped off last year had torn a little, and…

Kristen turned it over. A trace of glue was still on the back. She put her mouth against it, a kiss. Her mother had been the last one to touch that spot when she had passed it up for her years ago. She had still been Baby Elizabeth then… no one had called her Kristen yet, and her mother had been alive…' playing the piano with you on her lap,' Poppy had told her once, 'dancing in the living room with

you on her shoulder.' Kristen wished she could remember it.

She could hear her father coming now, whistling along 17th Street, just off the Q3A bus, calling hello to Mrs. Bruns. Gram heard him too. 'Dinner this minute, Kristen. 'She said, slumping back toward the kitchen.

Kristen stood up and put the star between two pages of her book, Evangeline. By this time, Poppy was in the kitchen; she could hear him talking to Gram. Kristen raced down for a hug before Gram started to talk and talk, and no one else could get a word in edgewise.

Poppy was standing at the sink, his straw hat still on but pushed back, drinking a glass of water from the tin measuring cup. Kristen loved to drink out of that too. It always made the water taste icy, even on the hottest day.

Her father turned. ‘Kristen Billy,’ he said, smiling at her.

‘All packed? Ready for Ridgway?’

‘Ready,’ she said.

Gram rolled her eyes in the back of Poppy, but Kristen did not even blink. She slid some plates around the table, the forks, and the knives, while Poppy tossed

his hat over the hook on the door and washed his hands.

‘I have a surprise,’ he said over his shoulder. ‘You won’t believe-’

‘Mr. Egan is a Nazi spy,’ Kristen said at the same minute.

Poppy stopped listening to what she was saying. He always did that. It was one of his nicest ways. He was biting his lip, though, as if he would laugh.

Gram speared the boiled beef out of the pot and dripped it across the counter to the cutting board. ‘Mr. Egan is

not a spy,' she said. 'I've told you that about fourteen times. Mr. Egan is-'

'A spy,' Kristen said, her eyes narrowed at Gram.

'Well,' said Poppy, 'I'll have to keep my eye on him while you and Gram are in Ridgway.'

'You'll be with us on some weekends,' Kristen said. 'He could-'

'And what do you think poor Noah Egan is doing?' Gram asked, slicing into the meat.

'He's building something in his garage,' Kristen said.

‘Certainly, sounds suspicious,’ said Poppy, grinning.

‘It could be anything,’ Kristen said. ‘When he saw me looking in the window, he said I was into everyone’s business.’

‘True,’ said Gram.

‘You have to be alert,’ Poppy said.

Kristen slid into her seat, smiling. She knew he was teasing.

‘You said you had a surprise,’ she reminded him.

‘The piano,’ said Poppy.

Kristen took a deep breath. ‘I’ll miss it this summer.’ She crossed her fingers.

Gram turned to look at her quickly over her shoulder.

‘I love music.’ Kristen stared right back. Music, yes, she thought, but not the piano. The damn piano, she called it deep inside her head. If Gram ever thought she even knew that word, she would be in trouble for a month.

‘Like your mother.’ Poppy pulled a chair out across from her. ‘Well, you won’t have to be without the piano this

summer.’ Kristen looked down at the damp beef Gram was putting on her plate, the pale cabbage, the boiled potatoes with a sprig of parsley from the Victory Garden in the back. ‘But how...’

Poppy was nodding. ‘Not only the piano but an extra suitcase full of stuff if you like. I’ve hired a truck-’

‘A truck?’ Gram said. ‘What will that cost?’

Poppy waved his hand around. ‘Kristen has a birthday coming up,’ he said. ‘I just couldn’t resist.’

Kristen looked down at her plate, three piles of stuff, cabbage, and beef, and potatoes. She knew Poppy was waiting for her to say something. He was waiting for her to throw her arms around him and tell him how wonderful it was. She could hardly talk, though. She picked up her knife and cut her beef into a bunch of little pieces. ‘Amazing,’ she said at last.

‘Yes, it is,’ said Gram.

It was Friday afternoon. The school was over; goodbye, St. Pascal’s, goodbye, Sister Jillen, goodbye, report card. Kristen had put the report card in Gram’s hand at the front door, walked

right past her and up to her bedroom. Forty things were left to jam into a cardboard box.

Kristen put the first one in, a bottle of Kristen -of-the-valley perfume used up except for a little darkish stuff at the bottom. It smelled delicious, though. She waited to put the next thing in; she could hear Gram's footsteps on the stairs. She kept her back stiff, staring down at the bottle. She knew what was coming. 'D in music,' Gram would say. 'How could you possibly...' And she would have spotted that effort mark, B-, too. She would say the whole thing was a disgrace.

Kristen took a breath. Someone was knocking at the front door, banging on the door. She could hear Gram's footsteps stop, could picture her turning...

Kristen rushed to the window. Downstairs was the truck, gray, rusty: MCHUGH'S-WE'LL TREAT YOUR FURNITURE LIKE OUR OWN. Their furniture must be some mess, Kristen thought. And then, worse, what would everyone in Ridgway think when they saw the Mollahans arriving for the summer in a truck that was falling apart, an upright piano lashed to the back with rope, and

Kristen and Gram sitting squashed in the front seat?

Kristen closed her eyes. Horrible.

At least Gram had forgotten about the report card. Kristen went downstairs to watch the two white-haired men in the living room. They were talking to Gram, joking a little, one of them singing, ‘‘They’re either too young or too old,’ ‘while the other was telling Gram that both their sons were in the service and that they were keeping the business going for the duration of the war.

Gram was frowning, watching them hoist up the piano with a bowl of flowers still on top. Kristen could see they would be stuck at the door; the piano would not go through in a million years. Alleluia. And better yet, her report card was on the bottom step of the stairs. Gram was not paying attention to it. Kristen knew she was worried about the piano scratching the wall as the men worked on shoving it through the door.

Kristen reached down for the report card, backed up the stairs. She could see herself in the truck, Gram suddenly saying, ‘I never did look at your

report card, Kristen. Do you know where…’

Perfect. Kristen would not say a word. Gram had lost the thing herself. Not Kristen’s fault, certainly not.

Up in her bedroom, she looked around. Her book, Evangeline, was still in the dresser. Kristen moved the star to the front page and put the blue report card in the back as far away from the star as possible. Her mother would never have cared for report cards.

And ten minutes later, finally, Kristen was packed. She picked up the

last carton, listening to the perfume bottle clinking into her lipstick samples from Gertz Department Store in Jamaica, FREE TAKE ONE. Kristen had taken a bunch; you never knew when stuff like that would come in handy.

She started down the stairs with the carton, and Evangeline tucked carefully under her arm. At the other end of the hall was the wrenching sound of wood splitting, the molding hanging loose. Still, in the living room, Gram made an angry sound, but one of the men was telling her not to worry, molding was nothing, they could fix it up in a moment.

‘Tell Mr. Mollahan we’ll come back next week and...’

The piano. They had gotten it through. It stood there in the hall, huge, with round glass stains on the top and two of the keys missing the ivory. And then the men lifted it again and started the door. Kristen followed them, circling Gram still powdering her nose in the hall mirror.

The piano was in the truck now, with one of the men looping great pieces of rope around it, telling the other one, ‘I’ll stay back here, just to make sure the

thing doesn’t roll out.’ He winked at Kristen. thinking it was a great joke.

Some joke. Gram came out the door wearing her blue summer hat with the cherries. She climbed up into the passenger seat, leaving a spot next to the window for Kristen. ‘We’re off,’ she told Kristen. ‘At last. I never thought we’d make it this year.’

Gram was smiling; she loved Ridgway too. Kristen closed her eyes as the truck started. She did not want to look at the neighbors, who were waving at them and the piano and the rusty truck, thinking they were crazy.

But then they turned the corner, heading for the Belt Parkway, heading for Cross Bay Boulevard, and the bridge, and Kristen could feel the excitement of it, the ocean waiting, the sound of it, the role of it, and it was hers for the whole summer.

She did not open her eyes when Gram began about the report card. She could feel the vibration of the motor, and hear the man in front singing, ‘They’re either too young or too old,’ and Gram humming along. And the next thing she heard was the sound of the tires hitting the planks of the bridge. They were there.

Ridgway…

I have this drawing folded carefully in my backpack. We are sitting at the table on the porch, the river in front of us, summer rain drilling the roof above us, soaking us all that last Saturday, muddying the road, greening the grass, puckering the river.

In the picture Izzy is backing out of the screen door, balancing the cake plate in her hands. The cake was vanilla, and Izzy had gathered blue forget-me-nots to circle it.

I used the sharpest pencil (Strawberry Pink) to write the words on top of the cake: WELCOME TO THE FAMILY, HOLLY.

Izzy frowned. ‘I wanted to get your whole name in, but there wasn't enough room.’

The Old Man's eyes sparkled. A moment before I framed the picture in my mind, he patted my shoulder. ‘Kristen Copses, with us forever.’

Greens sat on the other side. I had drawn pages of animal tracks for him, raccoon and deer, rabbit, and possum …

and birds, even a loon that had come up out of the water to sun itself on a rock.

‘I'll probably keep them forever, Sister Loon,’ he said, full of himself. ‘Get it?’ He pointed to the loon tracks on the side of the page, nudging me under the table like a six-year-old, rattling the glasses, the cake plates.

‘Green’s, please.’ The Old Man had not been happy with him all week. Nothing gigantic; little stuff. Greens had left the shed door open, so a raccoon had nested inside … the one whose toes were marching all over green’s paper. Greens had left the house door open, so a bat had

flown around the living room Wednesday night. He had lost the Old Man's fishing knife, and one of the reels was sunk under the water somewhere downstream.

‘Why don't you just try with him?’ I had asked Green’s the day before as we rowed around looking for it.

I could see the anger in his eyes. ‘You're good enough for both of us,’ he had said. ‘That's what Pop would say.’

I leaned forward. ‘Is it me?’ I asked. ‘My fault?’

He had laughed then. ‘Don't be silly.’

Still, I was not sure. I opened my mouth to tell him about me, a mountain of trouble, but before I could, he tapped my arm. ‘Hey.’ His eyes were earnest behind his glasses. ‘You don't have to look like that.’ He broke off a piece of holly and handed it to me. ‘Peace, Kristen. It is just like you. Prickly, but not bad to look at.’

I had tried to hide my smile.

Now Izzy put the cake in the center of the table. ‘Should we have candles?’ she asked.

‘Sure.’ Green’s grinned at me. ‘The works.’

‘Why not?’ I leaned back. I was full of myself too, thinking about calling the Old Man Pop, and Izzy Mom.

Izzy went inside to rummage through the table drawers for the candles, and Green turned to me, saying we might walk up on the mountain after supper.

The Old Man looked at him sharply. ‘In the rain?’

‘Don't worry.’ I knew I could make the Old Man smile.

‘We're tougher than the rain.’

‘I'm not talking about going all the way to the top,’

Greens said.

We ate the cake then, the icing melting on my tongue, and I was feeling guilty because I was the one who wanted to go up on the mountaintop.

The end of the old Kristen. Hey, world, here comes the new one.

And I wanted to go alone.

Films of Kristen Deniel

The next afternoon I went from room to room, taking my time, looking at everything. Everything. I did not go into Izzy and the Old Man's bedroom. That was their private place.

Filmstrips filled the guest room wall, and I spent a long time looking at each one. I waited to get to the end to see if the one of me was still there.

First, there was a young Izzy in a two-piece bathing suit, then the Old Man sawing down a dead tree, sawdust coloring his beard. There were several of Green's: one without his front teeth, in a bunny costume, one sitting on the hood of the truck, and one with the fishnet in his hand, his head thrown back, laughing.

And the one of me was still there. I was sharpening a pencil, with pale pink shavings falling in a pile on my drawing

paper. I ran my finger over it: still there, in the row with the others, belonging to them.

Green’s room was next, a mess of a room. Socks on the floor, a jumble of string, a couple of keys, and a photo on the dresser. A photo I could not even make out, blurs of greens and blues, and something in the center that might have been the boat.

Behind me, Gram called, ‘I found boots. I'm going to wear them.’

‘It's too cold to go out,’ I called back. ‘You'll freeze.’ But the outside door

slammed, and I went to the window. ‘Gram?’ I put my hand on the glass; chilly air drifted in around the panes.

Gram was wearing Izzy's wading boots, which went up to her thighs. She twirled in the snow, arms out, fingers spread. It made me dizzy to watch her. After a moment she tipped over, but it was an easy fall, making me think of snow angels. Her scarf blew across the smooth whiteness, a scrap of color.

She was up again, zigzagging, and I thought about going after her as she disappeared in the back of the line of evergreens. I hurried a little, grabbing my

jacket. The thermometer outside the kitchen window read five degrees, and next to the window, on the wall, the calendar was still in August.

(August.)

I went out the back door, calling to her. And then in that cold stillness, I could hear her singing. ‘Over the river…’

I went after her, my feet heavy, twirling as I passed the circle she had made, singing back, ‘…and through the Deniel…’

She leaned against a small tree, staring at the thin strip of dark water that

ran between the chunks of ice. ‘Isn't it beautiful?’ I spoke.

‘I love to walk in the snow.’ She was shivering again, looking up at me, suddenly bewildered. ‘But why aren't we home? And what happened to Beatrice?’

I led her back into the house, into that warm room with the bright blue rugs and the huge couch. I found a robe of Izzy's and wrapped it around her. We sat by the fireplace watching the shadows dance over the walls until it grew dark outside, and we slept.

In the morning, points of light danced over my eyes. I raised my hand to my face; the sun was melting tiny swirls of ice on the window.

Somewhere outside was a faint buzzing sound. It was not close-close-anything to worry about-but what was it? Someone using a saw deep in the Copses. A snow-mobile? The sound gradually died away, and I stood up slowly, thinking about breakfast. There were choices, thanks to Izzy: cans of pineapple juice, blackberry jam, vegetables shiny inside their glass jars, rows of Dinty Moore stew.

Izzy's treasures, not mine.

I would pay her back someday, I told myself, pay back all of it.

Lighten up, Green is said in my head. I had to smile. That is really what he would have said.

I unclenched my hands and took another look outside. Footprints crisscrossed the snow. Our footprints. I thought about them uneasily, glancing up at the sky, wishing for more snow to hide them.

I put water on to boil and popped a piece of Gram's bread into the toaster. A mouse lived somewhere in the house.

Poor mouse. He would have to leave now that Henry was here. I wiped away the mice leaving with a brush, then sat at the table in front of the window, with Gram's wood pieces on one side and my food lined up in front of me.

After I ate, I looked at the tree figure Gram was doing of me: a long piece of wood, spaces drilled in the sides where the arms would be, a face beginning to take shape, a mouth began, a small, pointed nose, and a tiny cut on the forehead.

I put my hand up to my forehead, feeling that indentation. And then Gram

was there, yawning, her hair a whoosh around her head. She pattered over to the back window. ‘Sun today,’ she said, holding her hands out as if to warm them against the glass. ‘And a branch that's blown onto the step. Holly, I think.’

I took the last bit of toast crust and crunched it into my mouth.

‘The sun on the ocean makes a path sometimes.’ Gram reached for a chocolate bar. ‘You think you can walk on it, walk clear across the ocean to…’

She stopped and I tried to help her. ‘To England? To France?’

‘To where I belong.’ She sat at the table and began to work. As I put toast and hot tea in front of her, she glanced around.

‘What?’ I asked.

‘I'm wondering about Beatrice,’ she said and smiled.

‘And sandpaper. Your face needs smoothing.’

There might be sandpaper in the shed. I would get it. I did not have to look at the truck again; I would pretend it was not there. I opened the back door to a blast of cold air-’So cold your teeth hurt,’

the Old Man had said- and saw the holly branch, thick with bright red berries, that had blown across the steps.

Green’s holding a sprig of holly out to me: ‘Peace, Holly.’

‘I'll get my jacket,’ I told Gram. I shrugged into it, pulled on my gloves, and went outside for the sandpaper. The cold went through me, the smell of it sharp and clean.

The hot cocoa woman was far away, looking for me. She would not have a clue.

On the way back, I bent down and picked up the holly to bring into the house. I gave Gram the squares of sandpaper, then put the branch in one of Izzy's vases in front of the big window, thinking about Christmas. Ten more days.

Gram and I would have our own. I had cut boughs of pine, and we had packs of popcorn to make. It would be like Christmas in a book by Laura Ingalls Wilder.

I was happier than I had been anywhere, except...

…I did not belong in that house in Laurel Highlands, not anymore. I wondered what Christmas was like in the Old Man's winter house, what it would be like this year.

I snipped off that thought before I finished it. Wasn't it enough that I was here in Laurel Highlands, with holly in the window?

If only I could stay forever.

Something else the Old Man had told me about: fishing in the winter. The fish went deep, but if you caught one, eating was an experience.

An experience. The Old Man used words like that.

Fish for dinner, dotted with butter … No butter. Ah, fish smothered in tomato sauce, and string beans jarred last summer.

A real meal, the way normal people ate. Better than normal.

‘I know you like fish,’ I said to Gram.

‘Goldfish. I had one in a bowl; I think.’ She glanced at

Henry, who slept in the middle of one of the Old Man's blue rugs.

‘I don't trust Henry, though.’

‘To eat, I mean, for us.’

She looked across at me, shocked. ‘I'd never eat a goldfish.’

I could feel the laughter bubble up. ‘Pickerel,’ I said. ‘Bass.

I'm not sure what's around this time of the year.’

‘Ah, yes.’ She picked up her knife to shave curly bits off the wooden feet.

The Old Man's fishing equipment was hanging on the far wall. Did I want to go out into that icy world? Of course, I

did. In Green’s bedroom, I gathered things to keep warm: his old green sweater for a scarf around my neck, an extra pair of socks. I found a towel in the hall closet to wrap around my head like a turban, and one of Izzy's large sweaters to put over the whole thing.

I was ready with the pole in my hand. Gram laughed at the sight of me as I passed her.

‘The yeti,’ I said, and then I was outside, trying to decide. I could fish from the bank or the Old Man's bridge. The bank was closed, so I walked along the tree line and down to a spot in front of the

house. I swung the pole, lured on the line, over the ice into the narrow stream of water. I did not know how long I stood there fishing, but after a while I leaned back against a bare maple tree, watching movement on the other side of the river, just the quickest bit of color. A squirrel? A raccoon? But then I saw it was something larger, a deer.

It took one more moment to realize that a person, a fisher, was standing there, back among the trees. And if I had seen him, he might have been able to see me.

The pole slid out of my hands as I lurched backward toward the holly bushes. Another quick step and green's sweater pulled away on a branch. I looked back to see the pole on the snowy bank. It had sunk into the snow so that it could not be seen. There was just a narrow indentation in the snow; it might have been only a branch if anyone spotted it.

My mouth was dry. I looked across the river again. There was no movement on the other side: a scoop of snow slid off one of the Laurel Highlands; a blue jay teetered on another.

I turned and ran the last few steps toward the house and up onto the porch. I reached for the door, closed, and locked it in the back of me, leaned against it inside, taking deep breaths.

‘What is it?’ Gram asked.

I shook my head. ‘Maybe another fisher. Don't worry.’ Christmas was coming. It was someone cutting down a tree or poaching in the Old Man's Copses.

All right. It was all right.

He had not seen me, and we were safe.

Gram put on her scarf and her coat and wandered outside, ‘To breathe for a moment,’ she told me.

I stayed near the window, watching. But there was not anyone there, no one at all.

Films of Kristen Deniel

I know what people mean when they say they feel as if they are floating. That is the way I felt as if my feet were not attached to the ground as if they were bouncing off the floor, touching lightly, and bouncing again. And inside me, it was

as if bubbles were drifting, bumping gently into each other.

I was happy. No, that does not even describe it. I was … jubilant, ecstatic.

I drew it using all the pencils- yellows and oranges, pinks, and blues. I drew purple shoes on my feet and wings on my shoulders. My eyes were closed, the way you see films of angels sometimes with their eyelashes down on their cheeks.

So, does it make sense that I was not thinking? That all that floating, and all

those bubbles made me think I could do anything?

And so that last week, all I thought about was going to the top of the Old Man's Mountain and shouting down to the entire world. I even knew what I was going to say: Here I am, Kristen Copses, who did not deserve to be in a family … tough Kristen Copses, running-away Kristen Copses. Look at me. I climbed the mountain. Now I belong.

Films of Kristen Deniel

Half-awake one morning; I heard a train. I looked up at the window to see a

solid square of white: a storm, with pin dots of flakes covering everything. What I had heard was the roar of the wind coming down the valley.

I padded out of bed and went downstairs to see what was happening outside the big window. The holly bushes on one side of the house were just a blur; the narrow sliver of a river and its snowy bank had disappeared into a mist of gray.

A little cold, I hugged myself, watching that world. It was like a plastic globe in one of the houses I had been in. When I shook it, snow fell, covering a

bright green Christmas tree in its center. ‘Don't touch that, Kristen. Put it down.’

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Films of Kristen Deniel

It was late when we reached the exit sign for Laurel Highlands. The gas station light was out, and there was only a tiny light at the back of the grocery store. ‘We're almost there,’ I told Gram, ‘Just the last four miles.’

‘Already?’ She sounded delighted. She zoomed off the ramp, stopping on the shoulder, and in a moment, she was asleep, her head against the steering

wheel. Henry climbed off my lap, where he had been for the past hour, and slid onto hers, his whiskers twitching as he closed his eyes.

I leaned over and turned the key to stop the motor. Suddenly I was wide awake and reaching for the door handle. I gave Henry a pat, then I got out of the car.

At first, it was hard to see, but little by little silhouettes appeared against the sky: the curve of a tree trunk, the dark square of the grocery store ahead, and above us, the Old Man's Mountain,

raising its head to the sky. It was a shock to see it there.

Beatrice would have said it was a drawing coming to life. I pictured her in a place with huge cacti, saguaro, I thought they were called. I remembered she had said she would call every Sunday. What would she think when the phone rang and rang?

I shook myself. What would happen if I tried to call her again?

She had come home, her dream over.

I was not going to do that. Back in the car, I nudged Gram awake. ‘Just drive this last bit,’ I said, ‘and then you can sleep.’

We drove along the narrow road, no other lights now except for a few houses far up on the hills, and I kept talking to keep her awake. ‘We'll see the river. It's not as big as your ocean…’

‘Your river.’ Gram's head bobbed.

‘Keep watching,’ I told her. ‘We don't want to go off the road. The river would be cold for a swim.’

I saw her smile. ‘Henry doesn't have his bathing suit.’

And there was the bridge. I had stood on that bridge watching the pickerel, the catfish, the muskrat building his nest of sticks against its base.

The Old Man's bridge.

‘We'll have a fire in the fireplace,’ I said, ‘and turn the heat up high.’ I could see the Old Man flipping the switch in the early mornings when the dew was still on the grass and the house was still cold.

We thumped across the bridge over the river, and the house was in front

of us, waiting. ‘Gram, this is the place.’ My voice was flat. I might have been telling her it was a snowy day, or the sun might come out tomorrow, but inside, my heart was thumping.

We had just this winter, I knew that, and spring.

By summer we would have to find somewhere else.

That was months. That was forever.

I closed my eyes, remembering the last morning I had been there. I had gone out the screen door toward the car,

brushing my fingers along the holly bushes, feeling the sharp edges of the leaves against my thumb.

I had walked as far as the town, a long way in the early morning heat, and sat on the bench with my things on my lap, waiting for the Shortline bus, and looking down, I realized I had left the drawing box. That was the worst moment, knowing I would never see that box again. Geranium Red, Dove Gray, French Blue. ‘We're home, Gram,’ I said.

‘Hard to see,’ she said.

‘Just get used to the darkness,’ I told her. ‘In a minute you'll see it all.’

She took everything in then, and I with her: the house with the sloping roof, the evergreens leaning over it, the dark shadow that was the woodpile on the front porch. The rocking chairs were in the shed, I knew that, but I could picture them there, rocking gently.

Gram took a deep breath.

‘I knew you'd like it,’ I said, watching Henry in the rearview mirror. He stood on the back of the headrest now, his claws in my shoulder, his nose

twitching, his whiskers quivering, sizing up the place. ‘And you too, Henry.’

‘But is it all right?’ Gram asked, frowning. ‘Are you sure we can do this?’

‘We can.’ I brushed away thoughts of being caught, of what the Old Man might think of me if he ever found out. What did he think of me anyway? Please do not mind this thing I am doing, I begged him in my head.

A red cardinal swooped down to perch on a holly branch that bent itself into the snow, snow marked by threadlike bird prints and deep hollows from the

deer. The tracks hugged the edge of the clearing, close to the evergreens, and one path, from a rabbit, led to the river.

I wondered if Green’s had ever seen the house in the winter. He would love it.

I chewed my knuckle. A lace curtain of snow blew across the porch. It was bitterly cold with the engine turned off. I had to get Gram into the house. Her shoes had heels, with open toes and diamond-shaped cutouts on the sides. Why hadn't I thought of her shoes?

Henry scratched his claws along the car window, wanting to get out. I gave his ear a tweak, opened the door, and watched his belly through the snow away from the car.

‘I'm sorry, Gram,’ I said, still looking down at her feet. They would be soaked. ‘You'll have to walk through this to get to the house.’

‘An adventure,’ Gram said, grabbing the handle.

I slipped her scarf up around her head, the orange a bright spot in the

darkness, and buttoned the top button of her coat.

‘All right,’ I said.

Outside we skirted the trees, and she stopped to look up.

‘A million stars,’ she said, pointing. ‘There's the Dipper and Orion. Beatrice would love it.’ Then I held her by the waist as we went up the back steps.

Her face was a little disapproving as I kicked my sneaker off and, hopping, smashed into the small kitchen window. And then we were inside, Henry skittering around us.

I leaned back against the wall, reaching for the light, hoping they had not turned off the electricity. Suddenly the kitchen sprang to life. The refrigerator began to hum, and beyond it, I could see the huge living room with the long table at one end and dark blue rugs scattered across the wood floor. The Old Man was proud of that floor; he always talked about putting it in with Izzy, about matching the pieces of wood exactly, holding up his hands as if Green's and I could see them clutching a hammer and saw.

Gram shivered, her lips colorless, and my hands felt numb. I flipped the switch for heat and heard the furnace startup. At the fireplace chunks of wood and paper were piled in a bin. I knelt there, crumpling the yellowed newspapers to tuck in between some logs, and read last summer's news as I struck a match against the stones of the hearth: Someone had caught a huge trout near Byron's Falls; a sidewalk sale was planned for Main Street; there were canoes for rent in Shadyside.

I was here last summer; all of that had been happening. I kept talking to

Gram, telling her that this place had been mine only for a month or two, but now it was ours. And she sank on the couch, nodding, watching the fire.

Is it still mine? I asked the Old Man. Mine for just this winter.

A thin flame curled up from somewhere underneath the logs and Gram clapped her hands. ‘Fire!’

The Old Man's wooden floor shone with a rosy gleam, and my eyes began to close as my fingers warmed, but I could not fall asleep yet.

I settled Gram on the couch and found an old towel to dry her feet. They were mottled from the cold. ‘Skinny as a bird,’ I told her as I rubbed them. She put her head back, asleep again.

In the kitchen, I used the same towel to close the opening in the missing windowpane. While we were here, I would figure out how to replace that. There was glass in the shed; I had seen the Old Man measuring and cutting.

I climbed the stairs to the little green room that had been mine. Everything was just the same. The dresser mirror reflected my old sneakers,

just visible under the edge of the bumpy white bedspread; the curtains, pink with roses, looped back; and the drawing box on the dresser.

The drawing box...

I ran my fingers over that half-opened box, the pencils spilling out: French Blue, Geranium Red. It was hard to swallow. I touched all the pencils, the pad of paper, the sharpener.

Henry and I made four or five trips back to the car for things I had taken from Gram's house. Steam came from my mouth in small white puffs and

from the chimney in larger ones. But the cold did not bother Henry. He pranced through the snow, chasing twigs and a few crumpled leaves as if he were a kitten. He must have known what I was thinking. He sneaked a look back at me; then he sat upon a rock, perfectly still, like the old cat he was.

I would draw that later, I thought, Henry happy in the dark, with the river just a thread curving through the snow.

It took a half-hour to bring everything inside. I wrapped a blanket around Gram, and through the window, I could see the car at the edge of the road.

There would be room for it in the shed, I thought, remembering the Old Man's car on one side, the truck on the other.

The truck. Totaled. Was it still there? I shook my head. ‘I'll be back,’ I said to the sleeping Gram. ‘I have to put the Silver Bullet in the shed.’

You are going to drive it in? Green asked in my head.

You taught me how I said it.

But…

I can do this.

The truck hugged one side of the shed. I walked around to the front of it and ran my fingers over the cold metal, the sharp edges, the empty holes where the lights had been. I raised my hands to my ears without thinking so I could not hear the truck as it hit the trees that summer evening.

Outside a few minutes later, I turned the key in the Silver Bullet's ignition; the gas gauge was hitting Empty. Just one more bit, I begged the car, that is all I need. I sat there hesitating before I put my foot on the gas, but then I coasted along over the snow, the motor coughing,

and glided into the shed- not touching the sides, not even close- braked a split second before I hit the back wall and turned off the motor.

Ah, Green is said.

It was quiet, with only the soft whoosh of wind and the muffled sound of icy snow as it blew against the roof. I had done it. All I wanted to do now was curl up under the covers in that small green room upstairs and sleep.

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Films of Kristen Deniel

For the next few afternoons, around five, the hot cocoa woman called to chitchat. That is what she called it. She was chatting all the chatting.

‘How was school?’

‘Burned down.’

‘What did you have for lunch?’

‘Horsemeat.’

‘How's Mrs. Cahill?’

‘Who?’

‘What are you drawing?’

‘Nudies.’

‘Kristen,’ she said slowly one night. ‘Mrs. Cahill is old, and she tends to forget.’

Gram dancing in the street, giving me the hat with the veil, making popcorn at the movie.

I said more than I wanted to. ‘She doesn't forget everything, just some things.’ I stopped. The hot cocoa woman would never change her mind. I raised my hand to the window. Drops of melting sleet were running down the glass. Under the kitchen table, Henry was an orange ball, with only his pointy little chin turned up. Henry hated sleet.

‘Tomorrow is Saturday,’ the hot cocoa woman began. ‘I'll pick you up and take you to meet Eleanor.’ She paused.

I did not answer.

‘That's her name, Eleanor. She's going to have lunch for us.’

I pulled the telephone cord as far as it would go.

‘Then Sunday if all goes well…’ She broke off. ‘You'd be in the same school. And you could visit Mrs. Cahill often.’

I took the phone away from my ear and put it on the counter. I did it

gently so there was no noise. I wondered how long she would keep talking before she figured out, I was not listening.

It was gray outside. Gram's wooden figures were blurred and bent in the wind that had just come up.

Gram could not stay alone. She might not remember when it was super. She would sit up all night watching movies.

Beatrice. I picked up the phone and pressed the numbers.

It rang about twenty times. The answer, Beatrice. But then I remembered.

For the first weeks she would be travelling around, she had said. I pictured her in the desert, the dry sun beating down, her sketchbook in her hand.

I could not leave Gram.

I could not stay.

It was a puzzle.

Something from years ago popped into my head. It was not wintering, it was summer, and so humid everything I touched was sticky. All afternoon I had thought about the pillow on the bed, and how cool it would be against my head. I was surprised when it

was as hot as the rest of the room. I reached under the pillow to find something I had hidden there, a doll with pale painted eyes. I whispered to her, asking if she was cooling off. And then someone came and pulled her away, tossing her on the night table. I waited until the woman walked out the door, and then I whispered a little more loudly so that the doll could hear me.

‘Don't worry,’ I had said.

‘I'll save you in the morning.’

Why had I thought of that now?

Save Gram.

That is why.

The sleet outside was turning to snow. It reminded me of Green’s. ‘You'd love the snow in Hancock,’ he had said.

I thought of the summer house in Laurel Highlands. ‘I haven't been here in winter since I was a boy,’ the Old Man had said. ‘But it was wonderful, so cold it hurt your teeth, the river has frozen over, the animals coming up close to the house.

Everything was silver with ice.’ He had spread his wide hands. ‘Twisted icicles this long hanging from the roof. I used to knock them off and see how far I

could throw them.’ He had laughed. ‘My father had put in heat, so when you came inside, it was warm. I'd dry my hands on the radiator till they almost sizzled.’

Winter.

No one is there in the house in Laurel Highlands. ‘We stay in our house in Hancock now. Plenty of snow there, and nearer to school and the stores.’

How could I do it?

How could I not?

Gram was napping on the lilac couch. I went in and stood next to her, looking at that beautiful face.

She opened her eyes.

‘How would you like to go away with me?’ I asked.

‘To see Beatrice?’ she said.

I shook my head. ‘That's too far.’

‘Then where?’ She sat up, smoothing her hair with papery thin fingers.

It was hard to get the words out. ‘We'll take the car.’

‘The Silver Bullet,’ she said, nodding.

‘It will be an adventure,’ I said.

She smiled. ‘Henry, you, and I in the Silver Bullet. We'll fly to the ends of the earth.’

I smiled back, trying to think. Food, warm clothes, gas for the Silver Bullet.

It was Friday night. The hot cocoa woman would come for me at lunchtime tomorrow.

By then we had to be long gone.

Films of Kristen Deniel

We were frenzied that last week in August. That was Izzy's word: frenzied. And I drew it all:

Green and I are racing along the dirt road to buy beef jerky at the grocery store four miles away.

Sitting on a rock, pulling the jerky against our teeth as we counted the cars that went by on the highway.

Rowing up the river rapids and bouncing back in the rowboat with bruises all over our legs and arms.

Climbing partway up the Old Man's Mountain after the rain, slipping and sliding in the mud on the edge of the road.

And we never stopped laughing.

Anything so we would not think about my leaving.

Anything.

They told me what they had planned, the four of us sitting on the porch. I never needed a picture of that night. It was in my head, every bit of it, is there forever. But I drew it anyway: Izzy with one of my hands in both of hers, the Old Man reaching out to hug me until I had no breath left, and green's blinking behind his glasses, trying not to let me see how close to tears he was.

But I knew.

I drew another picture of what happened next. Before I could think, I leaned over to kiss green’s cheek, stained with grease from working on the truck, captured there in that drawing forever. Both of us laughed, embarrassed, and Izzy said, ‘Lovely. I'm going to try that too.’ And she leaned over to kiss his other cheek.

We were still laughing as Izzy spread out her long arms.

‘It's settled, then,’ she said. ‘You belong to us. This house …’ ‘And the river,’ I said.

‘…Is yours,’ the Old Man said. ‘All of it.’ ‘And Izzy's hard candy,’ Green is said, rocking back on his chair, looking happier than he had all summer.

Please let it be all right, I begged, looking at Greens’ face, remembering all the arguments he and the Old Man had had: a lost lure yesterday, a rake left in the rain, the truck. Was it because I was there? Was the Old Man comparing him with me? Me? Wasn't that strange? Was trying to fit me into family-like jamming in a puzzle piece that did not match? Would it ruin all the other pieces?

Izzy leaned over. ‘Hey, you two, don't look sad. We still had one last weekend. Remember?’

Last weekend.

Last.

I looked up at the mountain. The trees had just a hint of fall color. The mountain looked soft, almost friendly. I thought about standing at the very top.

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